NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

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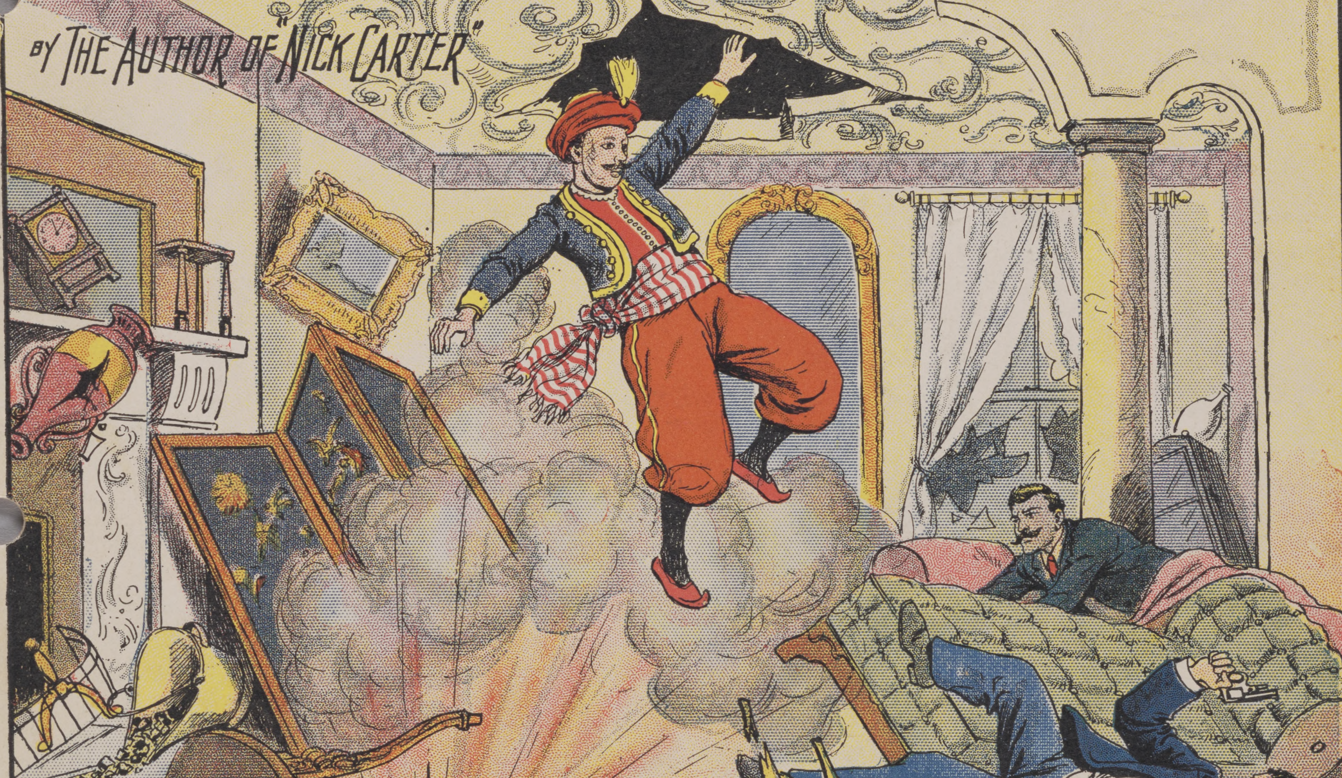
No. 440. **Price, Five Cents.**

THE FEAR-HAUNTED BROKER

OR NICK CARTER'S GREAT LONE-HANDED BATTLE

BY THE AUTHOR OF "NICK CARTER"



The report of Nick Carter's pistol was succeeded by an explosion which shook the building. Then, amidst the smoke, there shot into the apartment from the hole in the ceiling Atherton's mysterious enemy.

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The Fear-Haunted Broker

OR,

Nick Carter's Great Lone-Handed Battle.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

THE DEVICES OF SATAN.

One pleasant forenoon in the early fall, a well-dressed, sharp-featured man, under middle age, stood by one of the benches in City Hall Park, New York.

One foot rested on the bench, and, with hand on knee, the man gazed across the way to Newspaper Row, where a newsboy and the proprietor of one of the refreshment barrows were having a heated, wordy altercation.

While the wordy war was progressing, a black-haired young man of prepossessing countenance, with dark circles under his eyes, in which there was a look of dread, came down the steps of one of the newspaper offices.

The man in the park saw him, muttered something under his breath, then moved quickly away.

As he passed the door of the little cubby-hole of the guardian of the park, he saw that stout, strong-faced, good-natured officer emerge from the hole, keys in hand, who, instead of immediately locking the door behind him, stopped, to become intensely interested in the squabble in the Row, which had now reached a point where words had given way to blows. The newsboy, thin but wiry and scientific, had knocked down the sandwich-and-coffee man, and overturned the barrow.

Amid the din of yelling voices which followed, the man with the sharp face ran down the steps of the underground office and storeroom, remained not more than a minute, then emerged just in time to prevent discovery of his action, for at the instant he reached terra firma the park keeper turned about, and, stepping to the door, locked it.

At this moment, the young man who had come from the newspaper office was crossing the park in front of the City Hall.

The man with the sharp face, five minutes before destitute of either mustache or beard, but now provided with both, slowly followed him.

The pursued boarded a Columbus Avenue car, rode some distance, then alighted and made his way to one of the side streets near Fifth Avenue.

Before one of the residences he stopped, cast his eyes at the windows, bit his lips, flushed and paled, started for the steps, again hesitated, and finally, with a shake of the head, moved away.

The house before which he had stopped was that of Nick Carter, the great detective.

"No," said the young man to himself, as he retraced his steps to Broadway; "I will wait a few days. Nick Carter might laugh at me, say it was my nerves engaged with my imagination in the devil's can-can. It may be that I am losing my mind. I certainly shall go mad if these diabolic manifestations continue!"

He was walking down Broadway, near Astor Place, when a voice that seemed to come from the clouds, said, clearly, distinctly and with a Mephistophelian ring: "All the Nick Carters in the world, if there were a million of them, could not help you! The decree has been pronounced! You are doomed, Arthur Atherton!"

Atherton's face grew livid. He stiffened, pressed his hand to his heart, and would have fallen had not a well-dressed man, with blond beard and mustache and sharp eyes, quickly caught him in his arms. The victim of the voice soon recovered sufficiently to pursue his journey.

"Thank you," he said, faintly, to the man who had come to his assistance. "Did you—did you hear that voice, and do you know who it was that spoke?"

The man addressed showed surprised, then concern.

"I heard no voice, and I was just behind you when you staggered. I think," with a keen look into the countenance of the other, "that you are ill. You need rest. It is none of my business, of course, but, as a medical man, I would advise you to leave New York. Find some nice, quiet place in the country. Shake this hurly-burly for a month, and you will be all right."

"I am obliged to you," returned Atherton, simply; "and I believe I will do as you say."

"If you should at any time desire my professional assistance, this card will tell you where I may be found."

Arthur Atherton looked at the card. It read: "Philip James, M. D., — Fourth Avenue." In his office in Wall Street, he again looked at the card.

Then, as a sudden thought struck him, he took up the telephone directory, and hunted for the man's name. It was there, and the address was correct.

Arthur Atherton was a bachelor, and lodged in the outskirts of Brooklyn. At the close of business, he took a car, rode to the Post Office, mailed a letter, and then walked down Park Row to the elevated station at the Bridge.

He was halfway up the steps, when something struck him on the shoulder and then fell to the step. Atherton started violently, then glanced down, to be seized with a fit of trembling that threatened a collapse.

Down at his feet wriggled a small rattlesnake. For a moment the snake remained on the step; then, with a swift movement, found its way to the pavement.

As it glided away, Atherton cast his eyes upward, but saw only the backs of people who had hurried past him but a moment before.

He remained on the step until he had witnessed the end of the snake. Some boys had chased the reptile to the high fence then surrounding one side of the grounds of the City Hall, where it was killed by a tall Westerner, who, approaching it coolly where it lay coiled, promptly placed a heavy foot upon its head.

Arthur Atherton did not go to Brooklyn that day. Instead, he went to a hotel for the night, and the next morning, after breakfast, without delay and with set mind, he walked to the residence of Nick Carter.

He was fortunate enough to find the great detective at home. To his den Nick escorted the fear-haunted young man, and then, when cigars were lighted, listened to a strange and interesting story.

"I am a broker," began Atherton, "and up to three months ago enjoyed good health, a clear mind and hopeful views. To-day I am a physical wreck, nerve-prostrated, and my mind, I believe, is giving way. All on account of the diabolical efforts of a mysterious enemy who declares that my life has been forfeited to him and that the day of doom is close at hand. I have been harassed, tortured by this fiend in human form, until I fear even my own shadow."

"Have any attempts on your life been made since your enemy's deadly declaration?" asked Nick.

"Sometimes I think so, and sometimes I think he is playing with me. Perhaps there has never yet been any real attempt to murder me. But let me explain. About three months ago, a typewritten, unsigned letter came through the mail, containing this threat: 'Arthur Atherton: Your days are numbered. You have done that which merits death, but, as your case is beyond the law, I have taken it upon myself to be your executioner. Prepare for the fatal day. It is close at hand. Nothing can save you.' I paid but little attention to it, for I considered it either the emanation of a crank, who had gone mad over stock losses, or the work of a practical joker. But that afternoon I was forced to believe that the threat was real.

"I was crossing Fulton Street, at Broadway, when I was struck on the head with something heavy, and knocked senseless to the pavement. I would have been run over by a heavy truck if a policeman had not caught me by the shoulders in the nick of time and dragged me to the sidewalk. In a few minutes I had recovered sufficiently to stand on my feet. I felt my head. There was a large lump there, but no cut, no abrasion of the skin. I told the policeman what had occurred, and asked him to look for the missile. He could find nothing. There was not a stone, not a stick in sight."

"You were probably struck by a large, solid rubber ball," said Nick; "and the reason the policeman did not find it was because it had bounded and rolled away beyond the area of his search."

"Perhaps you are right," replied Atherton, though without showing any pleasure; "and the person who threw it did not intend that I should be killed. But I was alarmed at the assault. I had the upstairs rooms, as well as the lower ones, of the building investigated, but only reputable persons were there.

"The next night, shortly after I had retired, my room was suddenly filled with light, and, as I raised myself on elbow to ascertain what had caused this change, my eye, resting on the wall opposite the window, saw these words, in large letters: 'Sleep if you can, but remember that your nights, as well as your days, are numbered.' While I gazed, shaking, at the words, the light went out."

"Was your window at the front of the house?" questioned the detective.

"No; at the side, the garden side. My room is in a detached cottage, with large grounds covered with trees and shrubbery. It is within a short walking distance of Prospect Park."

"Any tall trees near the side of the house?"

"Yes—one large, tall elm."

"That explains your lighted room, and so forth. You were treated, without charge, to a stereopticon performance."

"But I went to the window. It was not so dark but I could see plainly the tree and the ground beneath, and there was no person about."

"Probably not, for the fellow who worked the light was quicker in his movements than you were. But go on."

"The next night, after several hours' futile attempts to sleep, I fell into a doze, to be suddenly awakened by a sense of suffocation. The room was filled with a strange, sickening odor. I found it difficult even to gasp. I tried to get out of bed, but my senses reeled, and I fell to the floor, and, as my breath left me, I thought my last moment had come. After a time, the feeling of suffocation began gradually to leave me. When I was able to arise, I saw that the door was wide open, and the window, which I had closed, had been raised. The draught of air had dispelled the deadly gas. Again I recognized the work of my mysterious enemy."

"And again he was playing with you," was Nick Carter's comment. "He had probably pumped through the keyhole a sufficient quantity of carbonic acid gas to give you a fright. Then, when the critical moment arrived, he opened the door, raised the window, and softly withdrew."

"For a few days after this," continued Arthur Atherton, "I was not harassed. Then came another typewritten, unsigned letter, posted from Hoboken. The first had borne the Yonkers postmark. The words were few: 'The day is approaching. Put your affairs in order.' Can you blame me, Mr. Carter, if I followed this direction?"

The great detective looked compassionately at the fear-haunted man, but said nothing.

"That day I made my will, put my affairs in such shape that my executor would have smooth sailing, and then went home, fearing that the night would bring the doom my remorseless enemy had pronounced. At about eleven o'clock, after trying in vain, by reading, to compose my nerves, I began preparations for bed. My coat was off, and I was in the act of removing my collar, when the door, which I had locked two hours before, opened quickly, and a man entered. He wore a black robe, with black mask, through the eyeholes of which two eyes, that seemed to shoot fire, became fastened on mine. First almost overcome with dread, I became, in a moment, fascinated. I could not remove my eyes from my strange visitor, who, I was convinced, was my mysterious enemy. While I stood, unable to move, unable to speak, the unknown took from a pocket of the robe a small phial, removed the cork, threw the contents into the air, and instantly the room gave forth a strong, pungent odor. Suddenly my eyes closed, and yet, though physically deprived of sight, I yet saw. What I saw had no connection with the room I was in. I beheld, as clear as if I had been there, a witness to the scene, two persons standing in front of a small, low, stone building on the banks of a large river. It was the Nile. The persons were a man and a woman. The man was myself. The woman's back was turned toward me, and she was cloaked and hooded. I could only guess at her identity. I gazed upon the scene but a moment, then I found myself rubbing my eyes and looking about the room. The unknown had vanished. I went to the door, and tried it, to find it locked."

"Did you recognize the Nile scene, Mr. Atherton?" questioned Nick, to whom this episode was of marked interest.

"No. I was in Egypt two years ago, but I never saw that spot."

"The explanation of your—vision, let us call it—is easy. The phial business was pure charlatanism, introduced to lend mystery and effect. You were the victim of hypnotic suggestion. The scene was mentally telegraphed to you by the man in the robe. We may discover the object before we are done with this conversation."

"This morning I walked through Prospect Park, on my way to the 'L' station. I had not slept well, and walking rapidly induced perspiration. Near a gate I took off my hat, and, as I did so, two shots from a pistol were fired. Both bullets pierced the hat. I looked around, and saw a man running rapidly through the trees toward a high embankment overlooking the railway track. Had you been in my place, Mr. Carter," said Atherton, with a look of shame on his pale, handsome face, "you would undoubtedly have pursued the man. I did not do so."

"Did you see his face?"

"No. He was dressed in a dark, business suit, and wore a Panama hat. I could tell you more," the young broker went on, "but it would be simply a narrative of Satanic persecution. And now, can you do anything for me?"

The telephone bell tingled. Nick took up the receiver.

"Hello! This Nick Carter's residence?"

"Yes, and I am Nick Carter."

"Good! I am Arthur Atherton's fate master. This is to inform you that if you don't keep your hands off you will never tackle another case!"

"You are very kind to warn me. I don't——"

Nick did not finish the sentence, for another voice cut in. It was harsh, and it said: "Stop! You are a fool! Let him take the case. We're safe, all right."

The great detective hung up the receiver, a smile on his face.

CHAPTER II.

LAYING A TRAP FOR THE ENEMY.

"I have been talking with your enemy," said the detective to Atherton; "and I could easily ascertain whence the call came, but it would be a waste of time. We are dealing with a very cunning rascal, or pair of rascals, and he, or they, ran no risk when the phone was used. It was a public slot machine, of course."

"Make sure of it, won't you?" pleaded Atherton.

"Certainly."

In a minute an answer from central corroborated Nick's statement. After repeating what the unknown and his companion had said, the detective expressed this opinion:

"I can account for this phone business in two ways: Either your enemy is not sure of his ability to carry out his scheme and hoodwink me, or he has amused himself by throwing out this warning, having no fear that one is needed. It is too early in the game to size up the man, or men—there are two of them, as you now know—who are trying either to make you commit suicide, send you to an insane asylum or murder you outright, after having tortured you sufficiently. How that Dr. Philip James must hate you!"

"Dr. Philip James? The man who came to my assistance on Broadway? Why, what connection can he have with this fiendish conspiracy?" asked Atherton, in marked surprise.

"What connection? Why, he is the master spirit—the fellow who has played all these tricks."

Atherton looked disbelief.

Nick went on, coolly: "Of course, he was the man who did the ventriloquial act by sending his voice up into the clouds and scaring you out of your wits."

"A physician, having a regular location, do this?"

"I shall look up that location before the day ends. As to his medical standing, it is evident that he is either a quack, or has assumed the rôle of a doctor for a purpose, without knowing any more about medicine than you do. No qualified physician ever solicits custom, as your Dr. James did. Such an act is distinctly unprofessional. To be plain, when your alleged doctor gave you his card, and remarked that, should you ever require his services, you would know where to find him, he gave himself away. What kind of a voice had he?"

"Light and rather sharp."

"I thought so. That was like the voice that talked to me over the phone. A falsetto. You have never yet heard the man's natural voice. If you should hear it, perhaps you might recognize it. To keep you in the dark as to his identity, he disguises both his voice and his facial appearance. And now to bed-rock business. Have you any bitter enemies?"

"If I have any enemies in the world besides this man, I do not know it."

"Have you ever done anything calculated to bring shame, misery or bitter feeling to any human being?"

"No." The answer came quickly, and with an honest ring.

"Have you ever been the innocent cause of suffering?"

"I do not know that I have."

"Is it not possible that, while you were in Egypt, you might have unintentionally given offense to some one? Think this over carefully, for it is my opinion that we must go back to Egypt for the cause of this vendetta. That scene by the Nile meant something. Ah, you have a story to tell? I would like to hear it."

"I will tell you a story, Mr. Carter," said Atherton; "but I fail to see its relevancy. But I am not a detective, and you may be able to find a clew in it.

"When I left New York for a tour of Europe it was with the intention of staying away for a year. I had just come into a small fortune by the death of my mother, and I wanted to see the world before settling down to the business that had been my father's during his lifetime. After six months spent in wandering about England, France, Germany and Italy, I went to Egypt. In Cairo I found a number of Americans, some of whom had located for the winter. The queen of the set was Madeline Leith, the daughter of an American father and an Egyptian mother. The father had been a dealer in precious stones; the mother was the daughter of a high dignitary in the court of the Khedive. Both parents were dead, and Madeline lived in Cairo with her father's sister, an old maid. The house was headquarters for Americans, and, as Miss Leith was wealthy and her niece had a fortune in her own right, the entertainments given there were frequent and royal.

"I was never a suitor for the hand of Madeline, though she was a beauty, of the dark, Southern type, with languishing eyes, lips made for love and kisses, cheeks of velvet and a form that the gods would have envied. But I admired her, and I often thought that she showed me a preference over the other young men. There were two who were bitter rivals—Allen de Kay, the son of a rich Boston merchant, and Francis Mayne, a former secretary of legation, now living by his wits. Of the two, I liked Mayne best. He had a devil-may-care way about him, but he was never offensive, and was always in a good humor, save when speaking of his rival. De Kay was [illegible]-haired, light-eyed, something of a dandy, and spoke with a lisp. Mayne was dark-featured, like myself, and carried himself like a man of the world. How he lived, no one knew, though it was reported that he paid tri-yearly visits to Monte Carlo, and never without returning better circumstanced, pecuniarily, than when he left.

"One afternoon, when Madeline had been more than usually attentive to me—by this you will understand that the attention was rather one-sided—she announced her intention to spend the next week with a friend, who lived with her parents in a bungalow on the Nile, some twenty miles from Cairo. She was to start early the next morning. I asked and obtained gracious permission—she showed delight, in fact—to write to her. What she said to De Kay I do not know, but she was engaged with him for some minutes in animated conversation. Mayne [illegible] in the house at the time, but she did not speak to him. This conduct I thought singular, for they had apparently been good friends, though De Kay received more favors from Madeline than did the ex-secretary of legation.

"Two days later, both De Kay and Mayne left Cairo, and I never saw either of them again. A week passed, and then a report came that Madeline Leith had eloped with De Kay. Six months later, De Kay committed suicide at Monte Carlo. Madeline was not with him, nor have I ever heard what became of her. That's all, Mr. Carter; and, if you can find in my story anything that bears on the case upon which I have solicited your services, then I will confess that the mind of a detective is little short of abnormal."

"There was no doubt of De Kay's death?" questioned Nick, whose brow was thoughtful.

"None in the world. The man had been in Monte Carlo for a fortnight; there were several Boston acquaintances there, and one had parted with him half an hour before the pistol did its deadly work."

"And you say you were on friendly terms with Francis Mayne up to the time of his departure from Cairo?"

"Yes. And there was no reason why we should not be friends. We had had no business dealings whatever, and I was never a rival, as far as Madeline Leith was concerned."

"Yet that scene on the Nile—the man, who was yourself; the woman, who must have been Madeline Leith. It would never have been hypnotically suggested if the hatred which this man, or these men, entertain for you had not had birth in Egypt. I am beginning to think," continued the detective, "that a terrible mistake has been made; that you have been charged with an offense of which you are innocent. I am inclined to this belief from your failure to recognize the scene on the Nile. It was undoubtedly the intention of your mysterious enemy to put before your mind and eye a scene that should recall to you something of terrible suggestiveness. It would have been a piece of folly for him to have shown you a picture that represented nothing to your mind; and it is my opinion that when he left your room it was with the firm conviction that he had added weight to your fears by the exhibition of something that must have recalled a shameful action. There is deep mystery here, and it must and shall be fathomed."

Nick Carter's jaws squared. Arthur Atherton, despondent a moment before, brightened instantly.

"I am beginning to hope," he said, with the first smile that had appeared on his face for many a day.

"Hope, yes; and never, never despair. No matter what happens, keep up your courage. If I read the signs aright, it is the purpose of these enemies—let us not forget that there are two of them—to drive you to madness, if possible. That's what these tricks mean. Don't allow them to do it. Rely on me, and do not permit your mind to dwell too much upon the threats that have been made, or the theatrical exhibitions that have been given for your benefit."

"I will try to follow your advice, Mr. Carter, though I may not wholly succeed."

Nick remained in deep study for some moments. Then he said: "Your coming here to-day is known, and your enemies will conclude that I have taken up the case. They are masters of craft, and they have probably laid their plans well. But, as we know from the evidence, they delight in the spectacular. Because of this failing—it is a failing, and they will one day become bitterly aware of the fact, or I am no prophet—they will try one of their best tricks to-night. That is, if I am nowhere about, and you return home to-night as usual, and alone. I shall not be at your lodging place, nor in Brooklyn, even, for I don't desire that anything shall interfere with the carrying out of whatever scheme they may have in contemplation. Don't be alarmed"—as Atherton's face paled—"for there's no danger, I think, that any deliberate, determined attack on your life will be made to-night. These fiends do not desire your death just yet, though it is, beyond doubt, the ultimate design. You are booked for torture before death, and the longer your mind holds out, the longer you have to live. So try to be prepared for to-night's show, though it would never do for you to manifest unconcern. Simulate fright, and help the show along."

"Then it is not your purpose to do anything to-night?" said Atherton, disappointedly.

Nick smiled. "No, not to-night; but I shall do something to-day, and I shall require your assistance. If my plan does not miscarry, I shall know what occurs in your room to-night, even if you are unable to tell me."

"I do not understand." Atherton looked bewildered.

"Of course you don't, but you will after I have shown my hand. First, let me ask you to describe the position of the furniture in your room."

"My bed is opposite the door. To the left of the bed is the window, and the head of the bed is near it. The wardrobe is on the right of the door, the bureau opposite the window."

"Is there anything over the bed?"

"Yes—some short, narrow shelves, concealed by curtains. They were placed there at the request of a former occupant of the room, who used them for medicines. He was a hypochondriac and patent medicine fiend."

"Good. If there were nothing there, I would be compelled to have you supply the deficiency. It is my purpose to open the campaign by a little camera work. For to-night's work, the preparations must be made during the day. How do I know this? I don't know it, but I have formed a certain opinion regarding the peculiarities of the men who are your enemies, and also their manner of operation. I may be away off in my reckoning. If it shall be shown that I have been taking certain things for granted—have been investing your enemies with qualities which they do not possess, have been making a false forecast of their program for to-day—why, no harm will be done. But I feel in my bones that your presence here in my den to-day will call for an immediate and sensational exhibition on the part of your enemies."

"And what part will the camera play in your scheme, Mr. Carter?"

"The part of an inanimate witness and detective. Assuming, as I do, that the preparations for the nerve-racking exhibition will be made to-day, the next thing to be considered is the time for the making. Undoubtedly, this afternoon, for the forenoon is too limited; and, besides, the details must be worked out. Allowing for the lunch hour, and the time spent in the journey from New York to the Brooklyn suburbs, I should say that the preliminary work, the setting of the stage, as it were, will be done between three and four o'clock. You are home by five, so it is not likely that your enemies will be about the place between four and five. Between two and three is too early, so we will say between three and four. Therefore, what you and I have to do must be done this forenoon. The camera is here in my house, and you must take it to your room and place it on one of the shelves, the one from which the best command of the door and the room space about the bed may be obtained. And you must arrange it so that the lens will not likely be seen. You can do this by cutting a small hole in the curtain."

"I can do all that, of course," said Atherton; on his face the look of bewilderment had again appeared; "but I do not understand to what use the camera can be put. You don't expect me to operate it, do you?"

"No; for when it is in operation you will be in New York. Let me more fully explain. My apparatus works automatically, by clockwork, running an hour from any given time and taking sixty instantaneous photographs during its operation. Now, I will set the camera to begin work at three o'clock, and while it is compiling its secret history, I will find work on another lead here in New York."

"Does your camera shutter work silently?"

"That is what it is advertised to do," said Nick, knitting his brows. Then he added: "I understand what you mean. The click of the shutter, faint as it is—almost noiseless, in fact—may give the apparatus away, especially if the enemy has a quick ear. That defect may be easily remedied. Get one of those small, circular, nickel clocks, the loud-ticking kind, running and in correct time, and place it on the top shelf above the curtain. The ticking will drown the other sound."

Arthur Atherton, although he had acquiesced in the program mapped out by Nick Carter, was not altogether satisfied with it. He held the camera—with the manipulation of which he was thoroughly familiar—in his hand for a moment, and then said, hesitatingly: "Is there a better way of circumventing these villains? Can't we call upon the police, and have the house surrounded to-night?"

"Yes," replied Nick, not at all surprised or disappointed by the words, "we might do that; but what would likely be the result? Your enemies would not appear. They will, with their resources, know for a certainty whether or not the house is watched. We must make no mistakes, and we must proceed slowly. Another expedient might be suggested. You might arm yourself, and at the first appearance of your enemies blaze away, and thus attempt to settle the case for once and all. But, admitting that your nerve would not fail you, the chances are nine to one that, should you fire, you would give the signal for your own death. So that plan is too risky. It is your desire, as it is mine, to capture these fiends. And, now that they have sneered at my ability, have threatened me over the phone, I am determined, single-handed, to fight them to a finish."

"Say no more, Mr. Carter," said Atherton, heartily, "for I now see that you are right."

A few minutes later, Atherton, with the camera concealed in a hand bag, left the great detective's residence. The trolley took him to Wall Street. In his office he remained until eleven o'clock. Then he went out, and, jumping into a cab, was driven to the Atlantic Avenue ferry. His stay in Brooklyn was short, and at half-past two he was again in his office. While he sat there, trying to read the first edition of an afternoon paper, Nick Carter had just passed through an exciting adventure.

CHAPTER III.

FROM THE JAWS OF DEATH.

Nick Carter knew that there were many chances against the success of his camera experiment, but yet it was worth trying.

Mysterious enemies of Arthur Atherton might, if they entered the room, investigate every portion of it.

But there was the probability that, seeing things apparently as they were on the occasion of the last visit, and being in a hurry to carry out what they had planned to do, and the curtained shelves having no part in the arrangement, they might fail to discover the trap that had been laid for them.

Nick, looking at the matter from an Oriental point of view, had a shrewd idea of the kind of a trick the enemy would be likely to spring upon their victim.

He had made up his mind that the unknown individuals, if not Egyptians, had passed many years in the land of the Khedive, and that they had assimilated many of the customs and practices of the mystics and fakirs.

Combining what they had gathered in the far East with the scientific knowledge gathered in Europe and America, they were prepared, beyond doubt, to make life a burden to the victim of their hate.

The great detective took Atherton's case handicapped. He was alone, for Chick, Patsy, Ten-Ichi and other assistants, used when occasion required, were not in town.

Chick, who had contracted malarial fever in a late expedition to one of the country's lowlands, had gone to the Adirondacks to recuperate.

Patsy was in the hospital with a broken leg, the injury having been sustained while making a brave rescue of a child from the path of a runaway on the Bowery.

Ten-Ichi was off on a secret mission, likely to use up a fortnight's time, and others that he might call upon were not within reach. Playing a lone hand meant hard work, as well as danger, for he would be compelled to act many parts and to spare none of his time. But he neither showed nor felt disappointment as he set about what would probably prove a gigantic task.

He loved a fight, and one like this, in which a human life was at stake, in which cunning forces of evil were arrayed against him, in which a deep mystery was involved, quickened his pulses, made his heart beat strong, and brought quickly to the fore the iron resolution and the sharp wit against which so many acute malefactors had struggled in vain.

The forenoon was not spent when Nick, without disguise, went out upon the street. Twenty minutes' walk brought him to Bleecker Street. Entering a cheap, underground restaurant, he took a seat at a table at the rear, and close to the door of a small, cablike projection, which masked the pantry, but did not exclude the smells of the kitchen beyond. After giving an order, and keeping his eyes on the door for five minutes, he arose quickly, passed into the pantry, and on into the kitchen, speaking a few words as he went along to the proprietor, who was also the cook. Ten minutes later, there emerged on Houston Street what anyone would have taken for an elderly Southerner, probably a colonel, whose broad acres, mortgaged, might be either in Kentucky or Virginia.

At about the noon hour, the Southerner was engaged in conversation with the landlady of an apartment and office block on Fourth Avenue. "Yes," the woman said, in answer to his question, "there is one vacant suit, and the price"—the price was mentioned, and the Southerner, who had given his name as Maj. Calicut, made no objection to it. He would take the rooms, if he could be assured that the other occupants of the block were of the right stripe.

"I don't mean, madam," he courteously explained, with a wave of his hand, "that I for one minute would intimate that you could let yo' apahtments to any but first-class gentlemen, madam. But I am—er—very peculiar—er—madam. There are some professions fo' which I have, madam, no sympathy. In fact, I—er—entertain fo' them sentiments—er—of the deepest dislike. I was bawn that way. Will yo' be so kind, madam, as to give me the names and professions of yo' tenants?"

The landlady, a shrewd woman of business, replied, without offense, giving the necessary information.

"No doctahs, then?" remarked Maj. Calicut, in satisfaction. "I was—er—afraid, madam, that you might be—er—harborin' one of those pill dosahs."

"No, there are none of them here, major. I had one, but his month is up to-day. But you won't see him, for there are none of his belongings in the room, and there has never been any real occupancy."

"What! A man, madam, hiah a room and then not occupy it? I am surprised. No, I am not surprised, for the man is a pill dosah. But who is he? You have—er—excited my curiosity."

"His name is Dr. Philip James."

"What do you—er—imagine that he hiahed the room for?"

"I can't tell you."

"Not fo' patients, assuredly."

"I can give no opinion on that point; but there is a card on his door, put there the day he paid the rent. It reads, 'Out of town for a few days.'"

"When did you last enter his apahtment?"

"Three or four days ago."

Nick Carter, alias Maj. Calicut, asked a few more questions, agreed to take the rooms if they suited him, and the landlady led the way to them. They were near the unoccupied office of Dr. Philip James, and after Nick had engaged the suit, and made a deposit, he said he would rest a while before going out.

After the landlady had gone, Nick left the apartments he had engaged, and walked along the corridor to the door upon which the card and announcement of Dr. James was fixed.

By means of his picklock, he was soon inside.

There were two rooms. One was bare of furniture, the other held a library table and a few chairs. This was the front room.

The shades were down, and the room was in partial darkness. As soon as he had raised the shades, Nick looked carefully about him.

Nothing to indicate recent occupation. There was nowhere any article of a man's belongings. Not even a burnt match or a scrap of paper.

Nick was about to leave the room, when a man, in overalls and jumper, with black smooches on hands and face, entered. In one hand was a kit of tools, in the other a coil of wire.

"Light all right here?" he asked. "I've looked into all the other rooms, and maybe this one needs attending to." As he spoke, he walked up to Nick, who was standing near one of the bulbs, and stooped, as if to relieve himself of the tools and wire.

The detective stepped back on the instant, and his right hand went to his hip pocket.

Coincident with this motion, his ankles were caught in an iron grasp, and he would have landed heavily on his head and back if he had not, on the instant of the attack, bent his body, threw out his hands and grasped his enemy by the hair of the head.

The result was that, doubled up like a ball, Nick went down, the false repairer with him, and in such a position that he could not make use of the great strength which he possessed.

Quickly releasing his hands upon the hair, Nick clutched his enemy by the throat, and the battle would have been in the detective's favor had not another person suddenly appeared on the scene. A policeman's club descended again and again on Nick's head, until he lay senseless upon the floor.

Half an hour later, he found himself lying on the library table, his wrists and ankles bound with cords. He was wired to the table.

His head ached terribly, but his mind soon became clear. Looking about him, he saw two men, both masked, one slight in form, with deep, burning eyes, which, looking out of the holes in the mask and meeting his, seemed to flash phosphorescent fire; the other stouter, with eyes of steely blue. These were fixed upon the detective's discomfited face, and the look expressed a sneer. It was he who first spoke.

"For a detective of your reputation, of your capabilities," he said, in a harsh voice, "you have allowed yourself to fall into a trap that any amateur might have avoided. Of course, we expected you to come here. That was in the game. The card of Dr. James, who is your humble servant, was given to Arthur Atherton for the sole purpose of luring you to this house. Strange that you didn't catch on. You are averse, as Maj. Calicut, to associate with doctors, and now you are in the hands of two doctors, who, though lacking diplomas, are yet capable of prescribing the proper medicine for your case. And we really have been lodging in this house. We occupy rooms on this floor, but not as Dr. James and Dr.—I may as well give my partner's name—Dr. Free. Oh, no, we are simply traveling men, and our other names wouldn't interest you.

"And now that you are here, and in our power, we shall have no interruption of the Brooklyn program, which we have prepared for this evening. Yes, everything will go off without a hitch, and in a short time our account with Arthur Atherton will be closed."

"Why do you hate Atherton?" Nick asked this question, but not with much hope that the answer would satisfy him.

"Why? Ask my friend here. He may tell you."

"Because," was the reply of the slighter-built villain, in a voice as harsh as that of his companion, and showing two rows of gleaming, white teeth, "he is a despicable scoundrel, who deserves to die, and who shall die a lingering, horrible death!"

"What has he done?"

A laugh that had no mirth in it, that made Nick shiver as he heard it, was the answer. Then the false Dr. Free turned his back, and spoke no more.

"It should have by this time been borne to your understanding," said the so-called Dr. James, "that your presence on this earth is objectionable to us. You might never run us down, but you might worry us a little. To prevent interference, to make smooth sailing for our little plans, you must die. And your death shall be spectacular. Ordinary means will not be employed. New York is spoiling for a sensation. We are prepared to give it one. No funeral ceremony after you are dead, for you shall be cremated."

Nick was about to raise his voice in a shout, which might or might not be heard, when a hand was pressed over his mouth, and in a trice a gag was inserted.

"You will die here in this room, which we shall presently proceed to anoint with coal oil and then fire. The building, through the efforts of the city's excellent fire service, may be saved, but it is a safe gamble that this room will go up in smoke, and you with it."

With feelings that may be imagined, but not described, the brave detective saw the two human fiends proceed to put into practice their infernal purpose.

They had come provided with two large bottles filled with coal oil. After pouring the oil upon the wooodwork and upon the clothing of the victim, a large rag, saturated with the fluid, was placed, blazing, in a corner. Then they quickly left, locking the outer door behind them.

Now it was that Nick Carter made his most desperate fight for life. He was bound hand and foot, and wires held his body to the table. By wriggling, twisting and using all the force he could throw into his shoulders, he managed to overturn the table before the fire had gained dangerous headway.

The overturning loosened the wire, and by dexterous twisting he freed himself from it. But he was still without the power of locomotion, and, try as he would, he could neither twist himself out of nor burst his bonds. The flames were now encircling the room along the baseboard edges and encroaching upon the carpet. There was but one thing to do, a thing fraught with terrible danger and likely to prove abortive. But it must be attempted.

Oil had been poured upon portions of his coat, waistcoat and trousers, but the sleeves of his coat had escaped.

As the flames on the carpet crept slowly toward him, Nick Carter rolled to meet them, and, extending his wrists, saw the fire catch the rope, burn, and then snap went the cords. Rolling backward and over to extinguish the fire on the sleeve of his coat, and prevent contact with the oil on other parts of his clothing, he managed to reach the door opening into the rear room just before the flames arrived there. Once inside the other room, he closed the door, and just in time, for the front room was now all ablaze, and the heat was becoming stifling. Quick work was now necessary, but he had his hands free, and with his knife he cut the cords which bound his ankles.

Then, rising to his feet, in excruciating pain from the burns on his wrist, received when the cords were severed, he flung himself against the outer door.

It resisted his effort. Once more, exerting every ounce of his wonderful strength, he made the second attempt.

The panels splintered, and the door fell forward. A glance at the corridor showed that it was empty. The alarm had been given, and the occupants were already upon the street.

Flames shot through into the corridor as Nick ran. In the room whence he made his escape he had left his white wig and mustache, and now, hatless and smooth-faced, he hurried to the fire escape at the rear, and, quickly descending to the ground, went through back streets to the Bowery, where, in a secondhand shop, he purchased a hat.

Many articles of disguise he always carried about his person, and when he mingled with the crowd on Broadway he was the prosperous-looking business man of other days.

Nick was well acquainted with the managing editors of the various newspapers, and he was instrumental in having added to the report of the fire, in the last editions of the afternoon, the statement that Maj. Calicut, of Lynchburg, Va., had been severely burned, and that his life was despaired of.

CHAPTER IV.

IN THE MIDST OF ADVENTURE.

The fire operated to change somewhat the plans of the great detective.

Atherton's enemies would probably believe that Nick, though he had not suffered death in the burning room, as planned, would, if he did not die of his injuries, be out of the running for some time.

They would, therefore, be likely to proceed in their villainy with less caution than would otherwise have been exercised.

They would not look for any interference with their night's program.

After carefully considering the matter, Nick resolved to go over to Brooklyn.

To decide was to act, and an hour before the usual time for the arrival of Atherton the detective, as a peddler fresh from the Ghetto, was pressing the button at the door of Atherton's house.

There was no response. Another trial, with like result.

Then he went around to the rear, ascended the steps of the porch and knocked at the kitchen door. No answer.

He tried the basement, with no better success.

Strange that Mrs. Phair, the housekeeper, and the serving maid should both be absent at the same time.

Should he wait for Atherton's appearance?

"No," he said to himself, "I will not wait, for, should he be delayed, I might not have time to do what I wish to do."

It was easy work, with Nick's appliances, to enter the house, a window offering the easiest way. After satisfying himself that no one was concealed in any of the other rooms, he opened the door of Atherton's chamber, but did not immediately enter. The apartment appeared as such apartments usually do. There was nothing out of place, and nothing seemed to be missing. Advancing to the bed, Nick reached over it, and from the curtained shelf took down the camera which Atherton had placed there.

In the large, black carpetbag which held his peddler's wares was a box.

This he lifted out, and, opening it, disclosed a daylight developing outfit.

Two bottles taken from his pocket completed the list of appliances for immediate work. Before half an hour had elapsed, Nick lifted from the hypo a number of film negatives.

They were not thoroughly prepared, but sufficiently so for the purpose of inspection under a certain light which Nick knew how to obtain. These he scrutinized with eager interest. Some were blurred, but there were others showing the faces and forms of two persons, and the peculiar business in which they were engaged. One picture revealed the figure of a Chinaman stooping near the doorway, one hand holding a tack lifter, the other grasping the edge of the carpet, a few feet of which had been raised.

Over him was a woman, dumpy, with wrinkled face and eyes which seemed to scintillate in fiendish joy.

In one hand was a coil of wire. Another showed only the Chinaman, who, with brace and bit, was occupied on the floor close to the wall.

A third exhibited the woman kneeling near the bed, the head being obscured.

In the doorway, looking down, was the Chinaman, with a string of bells in his hand.

But one other negative was of value. The faces of both conspirators were shown.

The work which had brought them to the room apparently was done, for both were at the doorway, looking in with malevolent smiles.

The Chinaman was tall, strongly built, and fierce-looking. One of his arms was about the waist of the woman, the other rested upon the door jamb.

This picture took up Nick Carter's attention for some minutes.

At last, the films were crushed in his hand and thrust into his pocket, the hypo dumped into the wash basin, the box closed and locked, and replaced in the carpetbag. Nick had no more use for the films. They had served their purpose.

Although having a shrewd idea of the demonstration that the plotters had arranged for the evening, Nick was about to make an examination under the bed, when footfalls in one of the lower rooms caught his ear.

Taking up his bag, he stole softly down the stairs, entered the hall, and saw, standing in the doorway, looking into the front yard, a stoutly built woman. Her back was toward him. In an instant the situation flashed upon the detective's mind.

While occupied in Atherton's rooms he had thought it strange that the work which Atherton's enemies had proposed could be carried on without attracting the attention of Mrs. Phair, the housekeeper, unless she, as well as the serving maid, had been absent all of the afternoon.

But how could Atherton's enemies know that a departure, leaving the house unoccupied, was contemplated?

There were also other peculiar circumstances, notably the visit of the woman and the man to Atherton's room at other times. True, all the operations of the young broker's enemies might have been carried on without attracting attention, but the chances were against such a thing.

There was always the probability that Atherton might cry out in his fright, and that there might be other noises, such as the overturning of furniture.

And yet the operations against Atherton's peace of mind had been carried on, and there had been no hint that Mrs. Phair or the serving maid had been disturbed, or were even aware that Atherton had visitors, welcome or unwelcome.

The conclusion was obvious. Atherton's enemies had safeguarded their operations.

How? By bribing Mrs. Phair? Possibly, though Atherton had assured Nick that the housekeeper was an old resident, and honest and true.

There was another explanation, and the quick glance he threw at the woman's form before she turned convinced him that it was the true one.

Mrs. Phair had been spirited away, or sent out of the city under false representations—serious illness of a relative, or something of that sort—and her place had been taken by the person now at the front door.

And that meant that Atherton's enemies were in full possession of the house, prepared to do their worst, and probably laughing in their sleeves at the efforts that had been made to detect them.

Nick coughed slightly, and the woman turned to confirm his suspicions. Plainly dressed, of dumpy figure, face lined with wrinkles, and with eyes never to be forgotten, there faced the great detective the woman of the negative, she whom, by the evidence of the camera, had recently been in Arthur Atherton's chamber for a secret purpose.

But the eyes, now that he saw them animate, were the eyes of the slenderly built man of the Fourth Avenue house, the man who had been referred to by the other villain as Dr. Free.

For a moment they stood looking at each other.

Neither made a movement, but Nick Carter was about to do so, when he caught sight of a queer-looking man coming from the side of the house toward the door.

He had a mouth like a wolf, and small, beady eyes set close together. He opened his mouth as his eyes ranged from the woman to Nick, displaying two sets of false teeth that projected beyond the line of the jaws.

The detective knew him in an instant for Slippery Joe, porch climber, who had been sent to prison several years before.

And now ensued a game of cross purposes. Slippery Joe stepped to the doorway, and to the side of the false Mrs. Phair.

But, just before he had taken this position, a sign from Nick Carter, of such a nature that it passed unobserved by Atherton's enemy, brought forth as answer a scratch of the right eyebrow.

Before a word was said, the disguised detective knew that the dumpy person in woman's clothes was really a woman.

Dr. Free might be the name under which she was sometimes known, but the indisputable fact remained that it was no man who had assisted in the scheme to murder, and who was either chief or confederate in the diabolical plot aimed first at the reason and afterward the life of Arthur Atherton.

"Who are you, and what are you doing here?" she asked, in a light, hard voice. It might have been musical once, but there was no trace of music in it now.

"I came by the back door, vat?" given in a nasal falsetto. "I vant to show you somethings vat vill make your eyes rattle. 'S-sh. Say nodings." With finger on nose, and a suggestive wink, he dropped the carpetbag and knelt beside it.

As Nick was in the act of opening the bag, the woman leaned over and whispered something in Slippery Joe's ear.

He nodded his head, but, catching Nick's eye a moment afterward, he closed one eye. Lifting an oilskin package, the false peddler said: "Laces vat gings and kervenes would go ker-razy to zee. Look here vonce." He opened the package, and, rising, with a piece of old lace in his hand, held the article out to the fictitious Mrs. Phair. As she took it, Nick grasped both her wrists. Without attempting to struggle, the woman looked at Slippery Joe, and hissed: "Now!"

"Now it vas, Choe," said Nick, pleasantly; "but use no more fiolence dan vas nezezzary." Then, to the utter surprise and dismay of the woman, Slippery Joe produced cords and proceeded to bind her arms and wrists.

"Dwo gan blay at dees game, I don'd dink," was the detective's remarks, after the woman, not without difficulty, had been subdued.

"You—you traitor!" she snapped, her eyes flashing murder at the man she had looked upon as her tool. Then, turning to the false peddler, she said, defiantly: "You think you are smart, whoever you are, detective or common thief, but you'll soon discover that you made a fatal mistake when you laid hands on me!"

"Per-lease ton't gall me a detective!" expostulated Nick, in a whine, as he raised his hands in vehement protest; "gall me teef, a cun vat vas a zon of a cun—any-t'ings vat you like, and I ton't care de znap of my goat dail. Vasn't dat so, Choe?"

The slippery one nodded his head. "Couldn't give de icy mitt to an old pal," he said, "especially a gun like Uncle Moses, who's got such a beezer on his block dat he can smell shiners troo a stone wall."

The woman, to whom these words were addressed, maintained a stony silence. Slippery Joe went on, now looking at Nick: "Besides, what's de matt wid dis plant? Anyt'ing bug about it? All here ready to cop, what?"

"Der vinest layout in der Brooklyn rhubarbs, Choe," said Nick, with a wheezy chuckle. "Der voman's got chewelry vat vill make us reech. Dot chain by her neck gonceals—vat does it gonceal?" Upon the words, but with no intention of answering his own question through a practical demonstration, he slipped in front of the woman, and reached forth a hand, as if to seize the chain of gold which encircled her neck.

"Back, you wretch!" she cried, her eyes gleaming, as they had gleamed in the burning room. "If you put your hand on that chain, you shall die a worse death than——" she stopped suddenly.

"Tan a tog, iss dat vot iss?" suggested Nick, with a leer and a significant side glance at Slippery Joe.

He divined what the woman had been about to say in the indiscretion of her overpowering wrath, and immediately felt easier in mind.

There was no suspicion that he was Nick Carter, and he was every moment emphasizing what on the surface seemed to be the fact that he was a burglar, who, in the guise of a peddler, had entered the house.

But time was precious. Atherton would likely arrive in a very short time, and whether he should be made acquainted with the actual situation of affairs, or whether he should be allowed to accept the scene for what it would appear to be from the standpoint of the uninitiated, there might be trouble, and the trouble would be made by Slippery Joe.

Cornered, he would kill a man without the slightest compunction, and, seeing Atherton, he might attack him before Nick had time to interfere. If only Atherton's other enemy would be caught.

Joe had been thoroughly deceived by Nick.

Years before, Nick, in the same disguise, had broken up a gang of thieves, of which Slippery Joe was a member, and no suspicion that Uncle Moses was a spy had ever been entertained by any of the lawbreakers.

Nick had arranged with Inspector Byrnes, then the chief of detectives, for a raid on a thieves' resort, and he, as well as Slippery Joe and his mates, had been arrested, and Nick, as Uncle Moses, had ostensibly been sent to State prison, upon a plea of guilty.

"Choe," he said, "time is expreshus. Dry de pedroom on dese town stairs, vile I vatch de vomans. Upstairs vas in dat pag," pointing to the black bag at his feet.

"Dat's right," was the cheerful reply, and Joe went off.

As soon as he had gone, Nick raised his right hand and stroked his long beard. The action disclosed something which caused the woman first to start in alarm, then to smile evilly.

In raising his hand, he had disclosed not only a bandage with which he had bound his burned wrist, but a portion of the red, inflamed surface.

The detective saw the start, and also noted the swift change of expression. While he wondered at the cause, the woman uttered a low laugh.

"So, so," she said, showing her teeth, white and gleaming, "it is Mr. Nick Carter, after all! Ah, I ought to have known no other man could have done what you have done. And your disguise is perfect. It shows that you are an artist. Pity that you couldn't have left your wrists at home."

Nick flushed, and then frowned. He saw how he had been caught. But soon his face cleared.

The game was his, if nothing unforeseen intervened to oppose him. In one stride he was at the woman's side, and, before she could utter a cry that should bring Slippery Joe into the room, his hand was over her mouth.

The situation was a desperate one, and, though he was dealing with a woman, he did not forget her fiendish character. Heroic measures were required, and the end certainly justified the means.

When a gag had been thrust into her mouth, and firmly secured, Nick said, sternly: "I can carry this business further, and prevent you from moving a foot beyond the place where you are standing, but I don't think further action is necessary, as my friend Atherton is due here in ten minutes." Then, stepping into the living room, he called out: "Choe, vere you vass? Coom here, ka-vick!"

Slippery Joe emerged from the chamber formerly occupied by Mrs. Phair, now used by the woman who had taken her place, and looked inquiringly at the false peddler. His coat pockets bulged with plunder which he had secured.

Nick had his black carpetbag in his hand. "Dump der t'ings in der pag, ka-vick!" he commanded. "Pizness is pizness."

Joe hesitated a moment, then laughed and complied. "I'm on," he said. "Youse'll be safe wid dat bag, w'ile I'd be advertisin' me graft like a circus poster."

"Now," continued the fictitious Uncle Moses, "get some speediness. Hike. Dere vass tanger abou-ut. I oxblains to-night. Nine py der clock down by Mudder Nason's"—a notorious resort on the East Side—"you gan drust me, you know dat, allretty, Choe."

"Sure!"

"Vell, den, go py der pack vay, and skitter for your life. Go to der Manhattan Peach Station, ride to der verry, and use dose bipe sdems of yours ven you got to der Pattery. Don't sdop fer noddings. Vait. How long you vas peen here? Who encaged you?"

"I was workin' der crib like youse was, w'en de dame spotted me. I would ha' finished her, sure Mike, if she hadn't cantered in an' coppered me game by trunnin' out a bait dat I snapped like a pike. Me graft was to stop here an' do de bouncin' stunt, wit variations, for a geezer dat she was layin' for. I wasn't here more dan a hour before youse butted in."

"I see, Choe. She vass coddin' you till dot man of hers coomed. He'll be here in a minute. Shlide!"

Slippery Joe shot out of the back door as if propelled by a catapult, and his long legs flew over the ground at race-horse gait.

During this conversation, Nick had stood so that he could keep an eye on the woman. But she had never moved from her position by the hall door.

The detective was again by her side, when two men came down the path toward the house. They did not walk together. One, Arthur Atherton, was several yards in advance. The other, a Chinaman, shouldering a pole, from which, on either side, depended a well-filled basket, shambled behind.

Nick Carter saw the Chinaman, and knew that a crisis was approaching.

CHAPTER V.

NICK CARTER IN A TIGHT PLACE.

Arthur Atherton who every afternoon had office work to do, was making ready to leave for home, when a tall Chinaman, dressed like a coolie, but with a face that expressed more intelligence than is usually seen in the lower order of Chinese, opened the door, put his finger to his lips, and entered.

Atherton was regarding the Chinaman in astonishment, when an envelope was produced from the blue blouse and handed to the broker, who read the inclosure with marked interest, but without suspicion.

"Dear Mr. Atherton," the note ran, "I have made an important discovery, which has necessitated a change of plan. I can't come in person, for the reason that it might seriously interfere with the clew which I am now following. The bearer is James McNear, one of the most skillful and reliable sleuths in the city. He has assisted me many times, and I was fortunate enough to run across him at Union Square about two o'clock. He will accompany you to your home beyond Brooklyn, and there prepare for a close-in to-night. I have not gone into the details of the case with him, but he understands that he is to assist in the capture of two persons who have threatened your life and who are playing with you preparatory to the final, fatal move. You may expect me to-night. When, I cannot tell you, for circumstances must govern my actions. NICK CARTER."

Atherton might have had his doubts as to the genuineness of the note but for the secret knowledge of which it spoke, and which, to his mind, could have been possessed by no persons outside of Nick Carter and himself.

His was not an alert intelligence, otherwise he might have suspected that, knowing of his interview with the great detective, his enemies had, by a simple process of reasoning, forecasted Nick's plans for the day. There was a strong possibility, of course, that they might not cover the workings of so astute a mind as that of Nick Carter's, and, to provide again defeat, they made other guesses. This, the shrewdest, was the first to be given a trial.

Atherton put out his hand. "I am glad to know you, Mr. McNear," he said, frankly; "and now I am at your disposal."

They crossed to Brooklyn by way of the first bridge, and stopped in town in order that the false Chinaman might procure pole and baskets to carry out his assumed character of a vegetable and fruit peddler.

"There is little danger of meeting your enemies this afternoon," he explained; "but, at the same time, it is as well to be on the safe side. If they are at the house, they will not suspect me if I appear with my baskets."

His voice was harsh and unpleasant. Atherton had a faint suspicion that he had heard the voice before. On the trolley again they talked on various matters, McNear showing himself well posted on all current topics.

As they came down the walk, the Chinaman, with mouth and fingers, gave a shrill whistle. There came a faint answer, a repetition, from within the house, the front door of which had closed when Nick caught sight of the approaching men.

"What's that?" asked Atherton, stopping suddenly in alarm, and noting a queer look in the Chinaman's face.

"Nick is inside," was the answer, in a whisper, "and we mustn't go in just yet. Follow me."

Mystified and not altogether satisfied with the condition, Atherton followed the bogus detective around the house. "Down there," pointing to the basement; "quick!" Bewildered and half in fear, the young broker allowed himself to be fairly shoved into the basement. Once within, the Chinaman closed the door, and, taking a key from his pocket, locked it.

Then he softly ascended to the back porch, and, with his ear to the keyhole of the kitchen door, listened intently.

Meanwhile, what was Nick Carter doing? Recognizing the Chinaman as the original of the negative, like a flash it came to him that the plans of the enemy had been changed, and that some plot was on foot which might mean the early murder of the broker.

One of the enemies was a captive; the other, approachin the house, was walking into a trap.

Nick, as has been said, closed the door. It shut with a loud snap. At the moment he attached no ulterior significance to the sound, but when, as he listened and listened in vain, for the footsteps that he had hoped would quickly be heard at the door, he thought of the kitchen door, which, when he had closed it after the departure of Slippery Joe, had given forth the same loud, clicking sound. Could it be possible that he was shut in? That the spring locks had been reversed? He had not entered by a door, and in his hurry to get Slippery Joe off, keeping one eye on the woman while doing it, he had not noticed whether there was anything peculiar about the lock of the kitchen door. He went to the front door, and saw that there was no catch. He turned the knob. The door would not open. The locks had, indeed, been reversed!

The design of the villains, who had made this change, was obvious.

In the event of the appearance of Nick, should he by a miracle escape death in the burning room, or of one of his assistants, should Nick be out of the way, the person would be caged while thinking himself secure and while planning to trap the enemy.

Of course, there were the windows, and he might break down either door. But either move would be but to make himself a target for the man to whom murder was a pastime.

The detective, leaving the door, looked at the woman. Her eyes shone in fierce triumph. "I'll hear what your lips have to say," he remarked, grimly, and, following the words, removed the gag.

"Thank you," she said, spitefully. "You've caused me half an hour of misery, but my turn will come soon! Then, look out, Mr. Nicholas Carter!"

"How soon?" he asked, with an affectation of innocence.

"As soon as my friend enters."

"Ah, yes. But he may be prevented from entering, out of a regard for his health."

"You will see!" Nick noted the confidence with which the words were uttered, and saw that he must guard, if possible, against a sudden attack. From what point it was to come, he had as yet no idea.

From where he stood he could look through the living room into the kitchen at the rear door. "Go into the living room," he said, sharply, to the woman. As she did not move, Nick lifted her in his arms and bore her into the room. Releasing her near the door opening into the kitchen, he quickly closed, and locked it, then hurried to the window which overlooked the side yard, and drew down the shade.

His next move was to lock the door opening into the hall. Then, with quick steps, he went to the bedroom door, which was upon the side opposite the window.

The key was obtained from the inside. As he removed it from the lock, Nick threw a swift glance about the room.

There was no one there, and the window was down and fastened, though the shade was up.

All the doors being locked, the detective found two chairs, offered one to the woman and seated himself in the other. To his amusement, the woman accepted the chair, with a smile.

In their chairs, they were near the corner and between the bedroom and kitchen doors. The false Chinaman might, in spite of the precautions taken, effect an entrance, but not without such noise as would reveal his whereabouts and place him at the mercy of the detective.

The failure of Atherton and the Chinaman to appear at the front door was evidence that the answer given to the Chinaman's whistle was not the correct one.

Nick had taken the chance that a repetition of the whistle would be the answer which had been agreed upon between the two conspirators, and he was now aware that he had made a mistake.

But, as it had been out of his power to give the correct answer, he had no fault to find with himself. Where Atherton had gone he could only guess, and that guess said the basement.

Satisfied that he could hold the fort for a time, at least, Nick reopened the conversation with his prisoner. Now was the time, he thought, to make an attempt to solve the mystery of her conduct, as well as that of her confederate.

"As we shall not, probably, be disturbed for some little time," he said, "I should like to ask you a few pertinent questions, for it is my belief that you have no grounds for hating Arthur Atherton as you do."

"No grounds!" she repeated, in bitter scorn. "He is a dastardly scoundrel, who deserves to die a thousand deaths!"

"So you said in the house on Fourth Avenue. But your words do not satisfy me."

"Why should I satisfy you? Who are you? My father confessor? Bah! You are amusing."

"I may be able, with your assistance, if you see fit to give it," said Nick, gravely, "to correct a terrible mistake, for that you have made a mistake of a most grievous character I make no doubt. Arthur Atherton never injured you in word or deed."

The woman made no reply, but her expression was one of contemptuous disbelief.

"You are Madeline Leith," the great detective went on, calmly, "and you have, upon false premises, assumed that Arthur Atherton has committed some unpardonable offense of which you were the victim."

"I am Madeline Leith," was the sharp answer. "I do not deny it. But you are mistaken, Mister Detective, in saying that I assume that Arthur Atherton has unpardonably offended me. I do not assume, I know."

"Will you tell me what you know?" asked Nick, stifling his eagerness.

"No"—shortly—"for I have never told a living soul. It is a matter which no woman of feeling would care to discuss. And if I did tell you, the matter would admit of no debate. The offense was too flagrant. And the punishment"—she added, vindictively—"shall fit the offense, be sure of that!"

Nick felt that it would be well-nigh impossible to make Madeline Leith speak the words that should give him a clew to the mystery.

But he did not give up the attempt. The enemy outside might at any moment make a demonstration, but Nick resolved to make the most of the time that remained to him.

"Did you suggest to the mind of Atherton that Nile scene?" he asked.

"No; but I made no objections, for reasons which you cannot guess."

"Then the suggestion came from your confederate, Francis Mayne, otherwise the Chinaman for whose appearance you are anxiously awaiting." Madeline Leith showed no surprise at Nick's statement. She regarded him coolly, with tightly shut lips.

The detective, whose mind was working swiftly, waited a moment for her to speak, and then proceeded, in a matter-of-fact way:

"The conclusion is plain, then. You have deceived Francis Mayne and he has deceived you."

Madeline Leith's interest was at last aroused, but not her suspicions. She wondered what ingenious story would come as a sequence of Nick Carter's pretended theory.

"If Francis Mayne had not been deceived, he would never have suggested a scene in which Arthur Atherton played no part, and which could contain in it no element of shame or terror."

"How do you know it did not suggest a shameful episode?" Madeline Leith asked, quickly and fiercely.

"Because Arthur Atherton told me as much. I believe he spoke the truth."

"You say this, who have known him but a few days. I know him through and through."

"You think you do, but you don't," persisted the detective. "And you think you know Francis Mayne," he continued, rapidly, and meeting her eyes boldly and honestly. "Has it never occurred to you that he might be using you to wreak a vengeance of his own? Who is he? A gambler, an adventurer, a man who lives by his wits, who is as cunning as a fox and utterly without principle. He was a suitor for your hand when you were the belle of Cairo. You gave him not the slightest encouragement. More than that, you ignored his presence on occasions when common civility would have suggested a better return for his adoration of yourself. When you left Cairo to visit your friend in the bungalow of the Nile, you bade good-by to both Arthur Atherton and Allen de Kay, but you never spoke to Francis Mayne. Why did Mayne disappear two days after you left Cairo? Why did Atherton remain? And why did you elope with De Kay? You may not be able to answer all these questions, but there is one man who can answer them, and that is Francis Mayne. If he were here, and would tell the truth, you would learn that he, and he alone, is responsible for the shame that was put upon you, and that Arthur Atherton is the same in all respects—honest, pure-minded, noble, manly—as he appeared to be and was when you parted with him that day in Cairo."

A trapdoor in the floor near the window opened quickly, and the false Chinaman's head appeared. In each hand was a revolver, and the muzzles were on a line with the head of Nick Carter.

"Were you speaking about me?" he asked, in a hoarse, chuckling voice.

"Yes," and with the swiftness of thought, Nick seized Madeline Leith and placed her in front of him. "We were speaking about the archscoundrel of this conspiracy, the man who, in the baseness of his deception of a confiding woman, would cause her to assist in the commission of a murder!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE DETECTIVE HAS A FALL.

Francis Mayne stepped from the trap into the room, and stood looking at Madeline Leith, for Nick Carter's head was in concealment behind the woman's back.

But for the gravity of the situation, Nick would have smiled at the comical appearance which he presented. Six feet separated the opposing forces.

Suddenly, with a mighty shove and with head still down, Nick sent Madeline Leith whirling against Mayne.

The next instant, before Mayne could recover his equilibrium, considerably disturbed by the unlooked-for collision, the detective had his revolvers out, and honors were easy.

For a moment, Mayne gazed at Nick in murderous wrath, then one hand dropped to his side. Realizing what the motion meant—the production of a knife that should cut the cords which bound the woman's arms—Nick fired two shots in rapid succession.

One struck Mayne on the arm that had fallen; the other, on account of the proximity of the woman, whom the detective did not desire to harm, grazed Mayne's neck.

Thrusting Madeline Leith aside, Mayne cut loose with both revolvers, and Nick, staggering, fell almost at his enemies' feet.

Both had been breast shots, and there was not a doubt in Mayne's mind as to the meaning of the fall. Nick Carter, shot through the heart, was a dead man.

A loud knocking at the front door arrested Francis Mayne in the movement he was about to make to assure himself that the detective was no more.

"Open the door!" The voice was that of Mrs. Phair. "Open it, or we will break in!"

Madeline Leith turned pale. "She has brought the officers," she whispered. "She has discovered the fraud, and means to have revenge! Quick, cut these cords, and let us get away from here!"

Mayne's knife was out, and he was about to comply with the woman's request, when a blow behind the ear sent him to the floor. Nick Carter, not dead, not even wounded, thanks to chain mail and breastplate, on his feet, confronted Madeline Leith.

He was standing in front of the open trap, and was about to speak, when, with a rush, the woman threw herself upon him. Nick stepped back as he saw her move, to strike, an instant later, the basement floor, eight feet below.

His fall was succeeded by heavy blows upon the front door. "They may be at the back, too!" the woman said, hoarsely, to Mayne, who was now rising to his feet; "but we must take the chance!"

The front door gave way just as she unlocked the back door. A Brooklyn policeman confronted them. Crack went Mayne's pistol, and the officer went down, with a bullet in his breast.

Through the rear grounds they dashed, making for the road beyond. Bullets cut the air around them, but none took effect.

Mayne, looking around, saw that they were not being pursued, only one officer being visible, and he was on the porch. Beside him was Mrs. Phair.

Only two officers had accompanied her. "I've a mind to go back," he said to Madeline Leith, "for we ought to be able to take care of one man and one woman.

"You forget Nick Carter?" she replied.

Nick Carter was consigned to the lowest depths of the infernal regions, and the flight was resumed. When they were out of the grounds, they found, at the side of the road, an automobile.

It had been placed there by Madeline Leith.

They were in it and speeding away toward Jamaica, when Arthur Atherton, Nick Carter and the uninjured Brooklyn policeman met in the living room. The other officer was dead.

Nick had been badly shaken up by his fall, but, landing on his feet, had escaped broken bones. His first move was to get out of range of a possible bullet from the enemy.

The scraping of feet, followed by the opening and closing of the porch door, soon convinced him that Mayne and Madeline Leith had decamped.

He would have mounted the rope ladder by which exit from the trap was effected, had not a low, moaning sound attracted his attention.

The sound was undoubtedly made by Atherton. Where was he? Nick looked about the basement—there was but one room—and could see no one. But in a corner was a closet, the door of which was closed.

Nick hastened to it, saw that the key was in the lock, and in a moment had the door open. Lying doubled up on the floor, half suffocated, bound hand and foot and with his head and face covered with blood, was Arthur Atherton.

The detective severed the cords, and, lifting the semi-unconscious broker in his strong arms, carried him to the outer door. There was a wash basin and faucet in the basement, and, after the head and face had been bathed and some of the water forced down Atherton's throat, the young broker opened his eyes.

He looked at the false peddler, and a spasm of fear shook his frame.

"You're with a friend," the detective said. "I am Nick Carter." Then, through the trap: "Hello, up there! Mr. Atherton is in the basement! Open the door from the outside."

"All right," was the response, in a man's voice, and presently the Brooklyn policeman entered.

He asked no questions, but assisted Nick in carrying Atherton to the living room.

Here the detective discarded his disguise, and gave his name. The local officer was surprised beyond measure. When his surprise wore away, he became apologetic. "I would have chased those murderers," he said, "but what would have been the use? It was a case of two against one; and, besides, I did not know whether Tom had got his papers or not."

"I would have looked after Tom," spoke up Mrs. Phair, a comely, middle-aged woman, with bright, black eyes and a strong jaw.

"Well, I wouldn't have got 'em, anyway, Mrs. Phair, for they went off in an auto. I saw them through the trees get into one they had probably staked out, and ride away like the wind."

"Which way?" asked Nick.

"Toward Jamaica."

The detective went to the telephone, to find that the conspirators had put it out of business. "Hurry," he said, sharply, to the officer, "and find the nearest phone. Then call up the police office, give a description of these parties, and tell what has occurred. Ask the captain to make the wires hot. Then call up the coroner."

When the officer had gone, Nick gave his attention to Atherton. The young broker was now sitting in a chair, and Mrs. Phair was bandaging his head. "The skull is not broken," she said, in answer to the question in Nick's eyes, "but there is a big lump on the side of his head."

"I was struck by something that looked like a policeman's billy," said Atherton, "and then I was dragged to that closet. I never wholly lost consciousness. What a fool I was to go into that basement! I half suspected at the time that I was being led into a trap, but I didn't have the will to resist that fiend's command."

After narrating the visit to his office of the bogus Chinaman, and the deceit that had been practiced upon him, Atherton said: "I was in the basement for not more than three or four minutes when the Chinaman entered. He came toward me, with his hands behind his back.

"'Your time has not yet come!' he said, quickly, and in a voice that made me shiver, 'so I will give you this as a preliminary!' And, with that, he shot forth the arm with the club, and I went down."

"And what deception was used to make you go away, Mrs. Phair?" asked Nick.

The housekeeper's black eyes snapped. "That woman who was here with the man lied to me. She came here yesterday morning, half an hour after Mr. Atherton had gone, and said my only sister—how she knew I had a sister I don't know, unless one of the neighbors told her it was in New Orleans, at a hotel, with a broken arm and internal injuries, reecived in an automobile accident. The woman said she was a friend of my sister, and, as the next train was about to leave New Orleans, she concluded to come on and give me the information instead of telegraphing it. And there was another reason, she said—and she is an insinuating talker—why it was advisable that she should make the announcement. My sister had told her of my position here, and she believed, therefore, that I would hesitate to leave until I had provided a substitute in the house. The idea! As if wild horses could stop me from going to my sister, if she were seriously ill and needed me! But I never suspected an imposture, though I did wonder at the woman's lack of understanding. 'And I will take your place while you are gone,' she said. So I went, leaving the house at nine o'clock. At Washington who should get on the train but my sister's husband. He had heard of no accident, and the telegraph soon exposed the fraud." Mrs. Phair looked at the trap. "I judge by the appearance of things that she had her man outside somewhere, and that, immediately upon my departure, they proceeded to turn the house upside down and make a murderer's roost of it."

"Yes; they lost no time," remarked Nick Carter, "and probably your going away as you did was the best thing that could have happened." The detective did not enter into a full explanation. But, as some statement was demanded, he continued: "The man and the woman had designs on the life of Mr. Atherton, and, from what has occurred here to-day, it is evident that they intended to make their final, fatal demonstration to-night. I have been up to Mr. Atherton's room, and find it has been wired, and electrical connection expertly made with the service in the house. Pandemonium would have broken loose in Atherton's room to-night if there had been no interference with the program of the fiends, and the horrible death of the victim would have been the wind-up."

Mrs. Phair shuddered, and though there was no danger of a visit of the conspirators to the house that night, Nick promised that policemen should be placed on guard at front and rear.

"You may say what you please, Mr. Carter," said the housekeeper, with an emphasis that was a settler; "but I shall not remain another night in this house while those villains are at large. And if I were you, Mr. Atherton," she continued, "I would find a safe place near your office, and I would not move out of it while your enemies are alive."

"I was about to suggest, Mrs. Phair," said Nick, "that Mr. Atherton should change his residence. To-night he can bunk with me. To-morrow we will make arrangements that I think will be satisfactory."

The detective and Atherton remained until the coroner came. Then they left, Mrs. Phair accompanying them into town, where she said she would remain until she felt she could with safety return to the house.

On reaching his residence, Nick Carter found this note under the door:

"Most illustrious proponent of the cause of a scoundrel: Don't imagine we have given up the fight. You are doomed, as well as Arthur Atherton. No matter what precautions you may take, what plans you may lay, you cannot escape. There will be but one attack, and that will be a finisher. YOU KNOW WHO."

CHAPTER VII.

SLIPPERY JOE BECOMES A VICTIM.

That evening, in his den, Nick Carter and Atherton discussed the situation. Atherton's nerves were in a frightful state. The experiences of the day had left him in a condition that presaged an utter collapse unless something fortunate, something promising quick relief, should intervene.

"Your enemies have received a lesson," said Nick, "and in future will be more careful in their operations. If I could only locate them, could obtain one more interview with Madeline Leith, I believe I could wrest her secret from her. That much accomplished, it would not be hard, with your assistance, to convince her that she is on the wrong tack, that her deadly enmity toward you has no foundation in fact. The nub of the mystery is in that scene on the Nile. You saw yourself there, and yet you were not there. Can you figure it out?"

Atherton passed a thin, trembling hand over his brow. "I—I've tried to, but I can't make head or tail of the matter."

"Let us go over the ground again," said Nick, gently. "Madeline Leith left Cairo to go to a bungalow on the Nile. Perhaps the point shown in the picture hypnotically suggested to you by Francis Mayne was near the bungalow."

"Perhaps."

"If, instead of your figure, that of Allen de Kay had been shown, would you have an inkling of what the scene meant?"

"Yes. It would mean, I think, that an elopement had been proposed. Maybe it was even then under way. De Kay and Miss Leith—Madeline—may have been waiting for a boat."

"Now, give me all your attention. Madeline Leith was in love with you. From what you have told me, there is no doubt on that point. Why, then, should she elope with De Kay? Because she was piqued at your indifference? Hardly. The acquaintanceship—your relations with her—had not progressed to a point that would suggest such a course to a woman of will and intelligence. You did not despise her; you were her friend. There was nothing to indicate that you might not love her in time. When you parted with her, you asked and obtained permission to write to her. She was delighted, in fact, at your request. Here, then, is shown most friendly feeling on both sides. You never saw her again until, years afterward, she appears as your remorseless enemy. The cause of her hatred was developed between her departure from Cairo and her elopement with De Kay. Did you write, as you had promised?"

"I wrote one letter."

"When?"

"The day following her departure."

"Did you post the letter yourself?"

"Let me think. No; I gave it Mayne. We were staying at the same hotel, and he came into my room just as I was sealing the letter. I told him that I had written to Miss Leith, and he offered to take the letter to a rider who was about to leave for the Nile stations. I gave it [illegible] him, and he went away with it. I saw him that evening. Nothing was said about the letter. The next day he left Cairo. De Kay also departed, but some hours after Mayne."

"Mayne never sent your letter," said Nick, with decision. "He used you as a cat's-paw, and he used De Kay."

"How? I confess I cannot see why he should do so."

"He was in love with Madeline Leith, but he was and is a wily scoundrel, and when he found himself out of the running he did not imitate the stereotyped stage villain by clinching his hands, scowling ferociously, gritting his teeth or publicly vowing vengeance against either the woman or the two men who were in her good graces, [illegible] of whom she loved. Not he. He showed a smiling, friendly face in your presence, but he plotted against you in secret. Your letter, as I have said, never reached Madeline Leith, but—this is a theory, and I believe it to be the correct one—a letter, purporting to have been written by you, did come into her hands in lieu of the one which you gave to Mayne. What was in that letter? Can't you guess? Words of love, the written protestations of a man whose diffidence had prevented confession of his sentiments while he was in the house of his adored one. And something more. A promise to come to her, a request for a meeting at the stone house on the Nile, the first step in an affair that should lead to an elopement."

"Yes, yes!" said Atherton, his eyes sparkling; "that must be the explanation."

"Madeline Leith, overjoyed at the written evidence of your love, kept the appointment, but you did not come. Instead, there appeared Allen de Kay."

"But why De Kay?" questioned Atherton, his spirits falling as rapidly as they had risen. "If your theory is correct, the sequence to the deception practiced on Madeline Leith by Francis Mayne would be the appearance at the appointed place of Mayne himself, and not De Kay."

"I think you are wrong," said Nick, quietly. "The appearance of Mayne, following your supposed failure to appear, would act upon the woman as a red rag would act upon a bull. He was the last person in the world to have profited at that moment. No; Mayne was shrewd enough to know that, if he was to win Mrs. Leith, it would be an act of folly to show himself at that point on the Nile under the conditions which he had arranged. De Kay was the man to fill the gap, and apparently save the woman's reputation."

"Save her reputation? How could it have been compromised by my supposed failure to keep an appointment?"

"To give consistency to my theory, to explain with exactness the after conduct of Madeline Leith, we must presume that the stone house on the banks of the Nile is at some distance from the bungalow, or from any other human habitation. My belief is that the woman went to the place named in the bogus letter with the understanding that she was to elope, and with you. The time was night. If you should not come, she would be left in a strange place, probably at such a distance from the bungalow as would prevent a return before daylight. Imagine her feelings at not meeting you. But they must have been as milk and water compared to her feelings when De Kay came on the scene, and told her the lie which Francis Mayne had suggested.

"The case is becoming clearer every minute," continued the great detective, as he blew a cloud of tobacco smoke into the air. "De Kay, of course, could not have known about the appointment, except from the lips of Mayne. De Kay was of loose principles. He was in love with Madeline Leith, and had been shown many favors. He was the woman's second choice. Had you never appeared in Cairo, she would have dropped into his arms. Mayne's plot was a dastardly one. He not only bitterly humiliated the woman who had spurned his advances, but he forever prevented you from winning her."

"But he knew I did not care for her; that is to say, that I did not desire her for my wife."

"He did not know it. You may have dropped words in his presence that to others might have been taken as a proof of indifference; but Francis Mayne, jealous and vindictive, looking upon Madeline Leith as a queen among women, could not conceive how any man with eyes to see and heart to feel could fail to adore her. He was your bitter enemy all the time he was pretending friendship."

"But how could he win Madeline by permitting the elopement with De Kay, Mr. Carter?"

"By putting a spoke in De Kay's wheel before any marriage could take place. If he could make Miss Leith believe that De Kay was a scoundrel—and with such Satanic gifts as Mayne possesses that should have been an easy task—he would earn her gratitude. By playing his cards well, the reward he hoped for was bound to come. By the way, how was the elopement with De Kay ascertained?"

"He was seen in Alexandria two days after Madeline disappeared."

"Had there been a marriage?"

"I did not hear that there had been one."

"And there had not been one, nor did she ever marry De Kay. She left Alexandria, and she left it with Mayne. There was a scene in that city, in which Mayne was the successful director."

Atherton looked thoughtful. "So Mayne is the arch-enemy, and not Madeline Leith," he said. "Strange, very strange, that after having won the prize for which he was striving he should seek first to torture and then to murder me."

"I think he would have sidetracked the torture feature if he had been acting alone," said Nick Carter. "But, as he could not, or would not, undeceive her, he had to add the scare trimmings to the plot aimed at your life. A woman scorned, especially a woman of the Orient, with her untamed passions, would delight in the course which in your case has been undertaken. It's a queer combination. Madeline Mayne, according to her own statement, has never told Mayne what she believes to be the truth, that you wrote to her, professing ardent love and proposing an elopement only for the purpose of insulting her—if she possessed a clear, reasoning mind, which she does not, she would have asked herself how it could be possible that you could do such a thing—and Mayne, on the other hand, has accepted her explanation of her elopement with De Kay without giving sign that he knew the truth."

Nick paused; then rose to his feet, and paced the room. Suddenly he stopped and faced Atherton.

"My theory," he said, "is all right as far as it goes, but there is one weak place. I have shown you why Madeline Leith might seek to first torture and then murder you, and I have suggested circumstances under which Francis Mayne might act as a willing accomplice. But I am convinced, as I said before, that he is the moving spirit in this murderous conspiracy; that he is the one who most ardently desires your death. Love for Madeline Leith, a wish to further punish you for daring, as he supposes, to come between him and the woman he adored, will not satisfactorily explain his actions. There is something deeper in this matter. Mayne has some motive, having no relation to the Egyptian episode, for desiring to put you out of the way. If he were a relation of yours—if he would profit, pecuniarily, by your death—then the mystery would be a mystery no longer."

"He is no relation. There are no Maynes in my family."

"Mayne may be an assumed name. Who are your heirs?"

"There is but one—a cousin, William Huntoon."

"Residing where?"

"In Berlin, Germany."

"When did you last hear from him?"

"About eight years ago, shortly after he went there. His father was an attaché of the American legation—secretary, I think. He died four years ago."

"Francis Mayne is an ex-secretary of legation. May he not be your cousin?"

"He may be, but why should he change his name?"

"Perhaps the criminal records of Germany might furnish the explanation. At any rate, here is something to work upon. If he is your cousin, he wishes your death in order that he may secure your fortune. To-morrow you must cable the American representatives in Berlin for information respecting William Huntoon."

There was a ring at the telephone. Nick hurried to it, and talked with the Brooklyn police office.

"The auto was found near Flatbush," he said to Atherton when he had left the phone; "but no trace of the fugitives has been discovered. The Brooklyn theory is that Mayne and the woman put on new disguises after leaving the auto, and then separated. That is my opinion, and they separated. to meet here in New York."

Nothing occurred that night to disturb the rest of Nick Carter or Arthur Atherton.

The daily papers next morning contained, among the local items, an account of the attempted murder of Slippery Joe, an ex-convict.

He had been stabbed in the neck, in front of an East Side resort, and was in the hospital in a dying condition. Although able to talk, he had refused to give the name of his assailant, or explain why the murderous attack had been made.

Nick Carter read the item, and while Arthur Atherton was on his way to his office the detective was making fast time in the direction of the hospital.

Arrived there, he was informed that Slippery Joe had not more than an hour to live.

"Time enough," he said to himself, "if he will only talk."

Having "open sesame," the detective was soon standing by the side of the cot on which rested the dying thief.

"Oh, it's you, is it?" Joe said, in some surprise. "T'ought dis play was outer your line. Youse can't be plottin' ter skinch der mark dat done me up. Dat would be a fairy story, all right."

"That's what I'm here for," was the earnest reply. And then, without waste of words, Nick exposed the Uncle Moses trick, and explained his presence at Atherton's house the previous afternoon.

Slippery Joe opened his eyes in wonder.

"Youse is a koochy-koochy, I don't think! Dat's de finest ever. De booze is on me."

"Now," said Nick, abruptly, "I want to know who stabbed you, and why you were stabbed?"

"Work yer block, an' you'll cop de game easy."

"Was your assailant the woman or the man?"

"De man. Never put me lamps on him before, but he was wit' der dame, dough. She was togged out as a swell. I spotted her w'en dey stopped. 'Dat's him, Willum,' she says; 'dat is der little beast dat trun us down!' Wit' dat, 'Willum' flashed de cleaver, an' I got it in der neck. It come so quick dat I couldn't use me props."

CHAPTER VIII.

MADELINE HEARS THE TRUTH.

"You are sure she called your assailant 'William'?" questioned Nick Carter, as Slippery Joe paused for breath.

"Sure."

"How was the man dressed?"

"Like a St. Regis grill grafter, one o' dem guineas wot blows in dere to feed dere face an' wat bunks in a dinky crib down by de ferry."

"Smooth faced, or what?"

"Black sweepers up to his lamps."

"And the woman? How did she look?"

"Like a p'roxide tenor at a Sixt' Av'noo hand-me-down—a mop of straw-colored hair an' a dried-grass duster on her upper."

"The stabbing occurred in front of Pete Moxey's joint, did it?"

"No; in de hallway, one side. But w'en I got der steel, I pitched onter der sidewalk."

"Were there no persons about?"

"Maybe, but dey must 'a' t'ought I was booze heavy, for it was two or t'ree minutes before anyone got wise on der game."

The last words were spoken in a faint whisper, and no more came.

Nick Carter walked briskly away from the hospital. He was aware that Slippery Joe's statement would have no value in a court of law, for it had not been given under oath, and death had quickly followed the utterance. At the same time, it had a value of another kind.

At the expiration of half an hour, the detective was in the back room of a little book and notion shop on one of the narrow streets near the Brooklyn Bridge station.

The proprietor was an old acquaintance, and, by an arrangement agreeable to both parties, had given Nick use of the back room.

There many of his disguises were stored, and there he had frequent occasion to go when it was deemed inadvisable to seek his own residence, or when his own pockets did not satisfy his needs. The person who walked out of the store a short time after Nick's entrance appeared to be a typical Bowery rounder, recovering from a protracted debauch.

One eye was covered by a patch, and the discolorations under it seemed to show that he had played an unsuccessful part in a recent *mêlée*.

Face, expression, clothing, walk, combined to make a most disreputable appearance. Fair women turned up their noses and drew their skirts away as he slouched by them, sullen and ugly.

A few blocks from the East Side joint where Slippery Joe had been murderously set upon is a costumer's shop.

The main room is long, narrow, dingy and dirty, but there is a smaller room in the rear, where wigs and make-up materials are kept, which has more light and less dust.

The establishment is presided over by a frowsy, Polish woman and her aged husband, stout and rheumatic and of no use except to sit at the door as an advertisement.

The old Pole, with red, watery eyes, an unkempt beard and a collarless shirt, which looked as if it had not been to the laundry since the building of the first bridge across East River, was puffing a black clay pipe, when Nick Carter, in the guise of the Bowery tough, came up and slapped him on the shoulder.

"Say," said he, with a twist of jaw and a twinkle of his sound eye, "do youse t'ink I'd cop de prize in a beaut' show?"

"No," was the placid response; "and I vouldn't vant you aroundt vere beobles vorked py de hour."

"Why wouldn't yer, old set down an' chew de rag?"

"Pecause vas so ucly you vould stob der glock."

"Dat gag has whiskers, Simon. Gib de but' anudder push."

"You vas so ucly dat a tog vould fomit py der sighd oof you."

"Once more for de cigarettes."

"Oof I hat you on my hants vunce, I vould pe ka-vick binched."

"Pinched? What for?" with a husky gurgle.

"For maintainoning a noosiance."

"That'll do. Take der beans. Say, Simon, Ise de mutt dat wants ter beat me face, see? Do a lightnin' change, an' gib Maggie de heart trouble w'en she pipes me at Molensky's shake-down to-night."

"Oh, you vants a gostume an' haf bainted dat gartoon oof a baddle dat you misgalls your mug. Low-eeser! Low-eeser! Get a move on! Dere's a gustomer, Low-eeser!"

Low-eeser came to the door, and Nick followed her to the rear. There he dropped the character of the tough, and spoke in his natural voice:

"Mother Simon," said he, quickly, and in a tone that compelled instant attention, "I am a friend of Inspector McClusky. I know what he knows about you and about this place. He knows and I know that you are permitted to stay here and do business only on condition that you furnish information whenever you have it, or whenever it is demanded in the interests of the law."

"Dat's right, dat's right," eagerly assented the woman; "and I keebs my word—I keebs my word! Nefer vonce haf I gone back on my vord!"

"I know it. And now to business. Have you, within the last few days, furnished disguises to a man and a woman who came here together?"

"Der vomans vas dressed like a mans."

"That is true. I see you understand, and are willing to help me. What costumes did you give them?"

"A Ghinaman's, a vlash dreed suid, a black tress suid mit black viskers, a blont vig and a blont mistooch."

"Good! Have they been returned?"

"De Ghinaman's came pack last night. Dat's ven dey dook de oder vons."

"Did they give their names? Do you know where they are staying?"

"Dey didn't gif no names, bud I know vhere dey rooshts."

"You do?" Nick's heart pulsed with a fierce joy. "Where?"

"At dot Astor Houses."

"The Astor House? Impossible!"

"My poy, Soloman, knows petter dan you aboud dat. He's grazy mit guriosity, and dese beobles vas so mysterious dat he followed dem. Dey gif him a slide vonce, and dat's vhen he sthumbled ofer a dhrunk mans on der zidevalk and bleeded his nose."

"Where was this? Near here?"

"D'ree, vour plocks avay, maype."

"How did Soloman know the man was drunk?" asked Nick, who was thinking of Slippery Joe, the attack upon whom the boy had probably just missed.

"Vat vas he lying mit der zidevalk if he vasn't drunk?" looking at Nick in disdain.

"Don't you read the papers?"

"Vonce in a while I spells Sunday vons, und——"

"Well, let that go. Soloman picked them up again and followed them to the Astor House. Did they register?"

"Dat's vat."

"Under what names?"

"Soloman vas on der stairs ven dey rechestered, but hadn't der front to go up py dat pig pook py der desk."

"Did they see him?"

"He say no. He slippet townstairs pefore dey turn arount."

With this important information, Nick Carter left the shop. Back at the little bookstore he changed his disguise, borrowed a suit case of his friend, the proprietor, then got into a cab at Beekman Street, and was driven along the Row and across Broadway to the Vesey Street entrance to the Astor House. As Martin Johnson, Denver, he registered at the office, but, before announcing his desire, looked over the last arrivals for the previous day.

There were two names which arrested his attention. One room on the fourth floor had been assigned to them. The names were William Hastings and Maxwell Grant. Every other room taken that day had either one man or a married couple as an occupant.

While the clerk was waiting for him to signify his wishes, Nick had his eyes on the keyboard.

To his gratification, he observed that the key of the room adjoining that of Hastings and Grant was on its hook.

That, of course, did not signify that the room was empty, but there was a possibility that such was the case.

"I would like the room," mentioning the number, "if it is vacant."

It was vacant, and, with high hopes, the detective followed the colored attendant to the room.

Inside, with the door closed and locked, Nick took counsel with himself. His plans had not yet been formed.

Surprised at first at the daring of Atherton's enemies in coming to a hotel in New York's most public district, he admitted, after reflection, that it was the wisest thing they could do. The very boldness of it defied detection.

By good luck, Nick had found the trail. He had been struck by the presence of Mayne and Madeline Leith in the East Side slums, and believed that their meeting with Slippery Joe had been an accidental one.

Why were they there? The fact that they were in fresh disguises and in the neighborhood of the most thoroughly equipped "make-up" joint of the East Side, carried with it the suggestion and the hope that they knew of and had patronized it.

A visit to the place had realized the hope. And here he was, with only a wall separating himself from one or both of them.

The detective, sitting in silence, heard, presently, sounds within the next room. There was the moving of furniture—not gently, but roughly—and soon came the sound of violent sobbing.

But not a voice was heard. Nick waited, with ears alert, but the sobbing continued, and there was no other sound. Perhaps Madeline Leith was alone. If so, then here was the chance he so much desired.

Opening his door softly, he passed into the corridor, and walked toward the elevator. Near it was a chambermaid.

Pressing a half dollar into her hand, he said, in a whisper: "Do you know who is in that room?" indicating the one engaged by William Hastings and Maxwell Grant.

"Des de young gemman. D'udder one done gone sense mawnin'. I heah dem rowin' fo' he went. Wouldn't s'prise me if he doan' come back no mo'."

Nick Carter cut short the conversation, and, turning about, went to the door of the room which so greatly interested him, and knocked gently. The response came quickly.

The door was opened, and Nick faced Madeline Leith. Disguised though she was, and in a man's attire, the detective knew her by the eyes. The wrinkles which had formed a part of her make-up as Mrs. Phair's substitute had disappeared, and the face was smooth and flawless.

Dressed in the habiliments of her sex, she would be a woman of remarkable beauty. As a man, she was handsome, with small hint at effeminacy.

Her eyelids were red with weeping, and she gazed at the detective with a questioning look, which had in it no hint of alarm.

"I have a message for Mr. Grant," said Nick, politely. "Will you permit me to step inside and deliver it? The matter is of considerable importance."

Madeline Leith inclined her head. "Certainly," she said. "Please come in."

When the door was closed, and they were both seated, Nick said, gravely: "I have not yet given my name. I am Nick Carter."

Could it be possible? The expression which crept into the woman's face was not one of dread, it was one of mingled pleasure and relief. Decidedly, something had happened favorable to his plans, and he had come at a most propitious time."

"I am glad you have found me," she said, quietly. "I—I am not the same woman you spoke with in Brooklyn yesterday. Much has happened. My eyes have been opened, and I believe now that you uttered truth when you said that Arthur Atherton had never injured me."

The detective's eyes glistened. "I am glad you have come to your senses," said he; "but how did it all come about?"

"Your words in Mr. Atherton's home impressed me, though you must have thought that I placed no credence in what you said. With the doubt in my mind, I took the first opportunity to question Francis Mayne. That was soon after we reached this room. I was in an angry mood, for he had stabbed, probably killed, a man whom it was never my desire should be punished by death. I believed that he deserved a good drubbing, but not the knife.

"I reproached him for his bloodthirstiness, and with your words in my mind, expressed the belief that he had been using me to wreak vengeance on Arthur Atherton. We are husband and wife, and we had been partners in a conspiracy to murder, but we had not been friends for a long time. I never loved him, and latterly I had cause to hate him. Now I know there is no man on earth so vile as he is. Why did I not kill him while I had the chance?"

Her eyes flashed in deadly animosity.

"I will tell you all that happened," she went on, when her passion had been subdued. "He had been drinking heavily for some hours—he always has a flask of brandy in his pocket—and my words seemed to infuriate him. 'I have used you,' he hissed, 'and a pretty mess I have made of it! Hereafter, I shall go it alone.' 'Then you have lied to me,' I said. He shrugged his shoulders, and sneered. 'Lied? Of course I lied,' he replied. 'I had to. That was in the game.'

"I felt like springing at his throat, but the desire to know the truth, and the whole truth, restrained me from attacking him. 'What have you done?' I demanded. 'Tell me—tell me all. I know by your words, by your conduct, by what Nick Carter has told me, that Arthur Atherton never wronged me. But how—how did you work the deception?'

"He told me to the last detail, and he seemed to take a delight in the torture which his confession inflicted on me. Believing that Arthur Atherton would in time ask me to be his wife, and that I would gladly accept him for my husband, he concocted the plot that should separate us forever. The letter which Arthur wrote he withheld. Imitating the handwriting, he prepared another, full of love, and urging me to consent to an immediate marriage. 'Meet me,' it said, 'at the old stone house on the Nile'—fixing the time—'and we will go to Alexandria and join our lives and fortunes.' I was there, but Arthur

Atherton did not come. In his place appeared Allen de Kay, with a note purporting to have come from Arthur, but which Francis Mayne had written. It contained the deadliest insult that a man could direct against a woman. In it Arthur Atherton, as I supposed, said that the letter suggesting the elopement had been written while under the influence of liquor; that it did not express his sober sentiments, and that, instead of desiring to marry me, he was devoted to the interests of his friend, De Kay. An elopement had been planned. Let it proceed, with De Kay as the directing party to the arrangement.

"When I had finished reading that cruel, grossly insulting note, I was beside myself with savage rage and bitter humiliation, and in no mood to reason. I knew Arthur Atherton's handwriting, and the idea of forgery never entered my head. De Kay tried to console me. I must say, he played his part well—and in the end I consented to go to Alexandria with him. Upon our arrival, I said I would consider the matter of marriage. I could not return to the bungalow, when I had left my friend with the false explanation that I was going for a short walk, for it would be hours before I could reach the place. So to Alexandria we went, provision for the journey having been made by De Kay, who, believing that I would marry him, had been a willing tool in the hands of that arch deceiver and villain, Francis Mayne. We reached Alexandria the next afternoon. In the evening, while De Kay was away, Francis Mayne appeared before me. He wore a serious face, and was deferential and kind. The story he told added the last drop to the cup of my misery. He said he had come postehaste from Cairo, after an exciting interview with Arthur Atherton, who, half drunk and filled with maudlin regret at his conduct, had sought Mayne and told him that the plot to throw me into the arms of De Kay had been the joint concoction of De Kay and himself. I was alone; there was no one to advise me, and, distracted, wishing to die, was easy game for the master villain who had plotted to bring about this climax. Dully, I consented to accompany him to Genoa, where he said he had a married sister, who would gladly receive me. We went to Genoa; the sister had gone. Of course, there was no sister. He had lied to me. Days passed. He was considerate, and I grew to like him, in a way. When he offered marriage, I made no objection. And when, after marriage, he proposed a scheme of reprisal, and outlined the plan to make Arthur Atherton suffer, my heart burned with fierce delight. It never occurred to me then, or afterward, that it was a strange thing that he should desire to wreak vengeance on the man whose wrongdoing had resulted in bringing about that which Mayne had long and ardently wished—my hand in marriage. I was so engrossed with the thought of my own wrongs, so venomous—I freely admit it—in my hatred of Arthur Atherton, and so fiercely desirous of making him suffer, if possible, more than I had suffered, that sane reflection could not come. And last night Francis Mayne—may his soul sizzle in the devil's frying pan!—told me how he had deceived me."

"Did he leave you last night?"

"Yes; but returned this morning to bid me an eternal farewell."

CHAPTER IX.

PREPARING FOR THE CRISIS.

"I suppose you have a very poor opinion of me?" Madeline Mayne said, after a pause. "Throughout the last few years of my life I have acted like a savage fool. And now—because I have been a murderess at heart—because blood has been shed on my account——"

"Not on your account," interrupted Nick Carter, quickly. "Francis Mayne had no thought of you when he killed the Brooklyn policeman and stabbed Slippery Joe. He was trying to save his own skin. He had never before met Slippery Joe, it is true, but he believed from what you told him that Joe had gone over to my side, and that, with his cunning, he might be able to defeat the murderous conspiracy."

"That may be so, Mr. Carter; but my hands are not clean. Arthur must have suffered terribly. If Francis Mayne is to blame for that, so am I."

"Atherton will forgive you."

"May I see him?" she asked, eagerly.

"No. It is best that you should not see him," replied Nick, with a serious expression. "At least," he added, as he noted her look of acute disappointment, "not for the present. And now for a few questions. We haven't yet got to the end of this Mayne matter. He left you in anger last night. Or, rather, you were both angry, each one considering that the other's room was better than his company. What words passed between you this morning?"

"He had left some things behind, and had come to get them. He was in a bad temper, for he had been drinking again, and said I should never look upon his face again. I retorted by saying that nothing that he could say could give me greater pleasure. He did not inform me what h's intentions were, but I believe that he will not leave New York until he has made the final attempt to murder Arthur Atherton. He blamed me for causing a postponement of Atherton's death; said he had been a fool to fall in with the torture plan, and gave me to understand that, acting for himself, he would take a different course."

"Did he not fear that you would turn upon him by calling me in?"

"No; he does not fear you—at least, he pretends that he does not. His last words were: 'Go to Nick Carter, if you feel like it; tell him everything; I don't care. He won't catch me, while it is a sure shot that I shall catch him.'"

"Do you know of any reason why Mayne should wish to kill Atherton?"

"No. But there is a reason, I am sure of that."

"Did he ever tell you that Mayne was not his real name?"

"No."

"Yet you called him 'William' just before Slippery Joe was stabbed. Why did you do so?"

The answer was given frankly: "His full name, he told me, is William Francis Mayne. Shortly after we were married, I noticed that some of his linen was marked 'W. F. M.' I asked for an explanation, and he gave it as I have said. For some time after this, I jokingly addressed him as 'William.' He was not offended; rather seemed to like the change, and finally asked me to drop the 'Francis' and call him 'William.'"

"In our talk at the Atherton house yesterday, you said that the Nile scene was suggested by Mayne. Do you know why he substituted the figure of Atherton, who was not there, for the figure of De Kay, who was there?"

"I can tell you what Mayne told me. In the belief that Atherton had discoveerd the point from which the sham elopement had a beginning, he placed Atherton in De Kay's place in order to bring bitter regret for lost opportunity. But the main reason for suggesting the picture was, I now believe, after what I learned last evening, to suggest the truth, to bring to Atherton's mind the painfully disturbing thought that he had lost a prize through trickery. If Arthur Atherton had ever been in love with me," Madeline continued, sadly, "he might have reasoned the matter out. But he was not, so Mayne's sinister suggestion fell flat."

"As far as it was designed to harrow up Atherton's feelings, yes," said the detective. "But it suggested something else, something which has led us out of the darkness into the light."

Following Nick's advice, Madeline Mayne left the Astor House, took apartments near Central Park, and discarded her male attire. She promised to remain in the city for the present.

After the close of business that day, Arthur Atherton went to Nick's residence, where he found the great detective awaiting him.

"Here's the answer to my cable," said the young broker. "Came an hour ago."

Nick took it, and read these words: "William Francis Huntoon cheated cards left city disgrace seen Egypt name Mayne. Lester dead."

"That settles it," said the detective. "We know now the motive. The sister is dead, and he is the sole heir at law. And now to trap him, if we can."

"It will not be an easy job, I am afraid," said Atherton, despairingly.

"No, it will not be easy; but the attempt must be made. While he is laying a plot against us, we must take the sting out of it, if possible, and at the same time play a trick on him. I don't think that any move will be made for a few days, but we will be ready for him, in case he opens up his game to-night. We must move our quarters. While we are safe enough here, there is not much chance of turning the tables on him should he appear. A few blocks away—five minutes' walk—there is a room in an addition built to a private residence which we can secure. I know the owner, who has long since moved to more costly and fashionable quarters on Fifth Avenue. The main house is now occupied, under lease, by a grain broker. He has no control over the addition, which is in the rear. I will call up the owner, arrange for a week's lease of the room, and then will proceed to important business."

The preliminary matters were settled over the phone, and then Nick and Atherton went out to look at the new quarters.

A blind beggar followed them slowly, as they turned a corner.

CHAPTER X.

THE LITTLE GIANT WINS OUT.

The addition to the house toward which Nick Carter and Arthur Atherton were proceeding was of brick, and two stories in height.

It abutted into a large yard. The lower portion was used as a storeroom. The upper part had served as an artist's studio, and had been built for that purpose, at the solicitation of the grown-up daughters of the owner of the property.

They had artistic aspirations, and their father, wishing to please them, had gone to considerable expense in having the room properly fitted up.

In the center of the ceiling was a large skylight, opening upon a flat roof. There were windows at the side, and these were provided with heavy shades, so that the light arrangement could be easily managed.

The walls of the room were dark oak, and were adorned with several large pictures. Other appointments were in keeping with the character of the room.

Entrance was effected by a stairway on the side. The stairway was reached by a garden path along the side of the main building.

Atherton liked the room, and said so.

Before night, furniture was brought, and such other articles as a sleeping apartment required. Nick had a couch, Atherton a bed.

From the room, the street was north. Nick's couch was in the southeast corner, Atherton had the southwest corner. The door was near the northwest corner, so that Nick, at night, was so placed that his eye could command both the door and the skylight.

Adjoining the main building at the front was a drug store. Next beyond this was a lodging house.

The day following the removal of Nick Carter and Arthur Atherton to their temporary quarters, a placard, bearing this announcement, was placed outside the window in the second story of the lodging house:

"NASADA,

THE SEER OF THE ORIENT.

To Him the Future Is an Open Book.
The Stars' Secrets Are His."

The placard was observed by Nick Carter the day after it was placed in position. It had not been there twenty-four hours before, for Nick's recent visits to the locality had rendered him familiar with every feature of every building.

Being a man of remarkable powers of observation and analysis, and a man who never forgot, he was thrice armed in his conflicts with criminals of all sorts and shades.

A talk with the lessee of the house, not in his proper person, but as Mr. Johnson, of Denver, elicited the information that the seer could not be seen. Although Nasada had paid a month's rent in advance, he had not yet brought his belongings, and would not be ready for business for three days, at least.

Nick thought he saw in this arrangement a repetition of the tactics employed at the Fourth Avenue house, the scene of the fire and of his narrow escape from a horrible death.

Therefore, without announcing his true name and profession, and asking permission to inspect the seer's apartment, he took his leave.

More than once during his work on the Atherton case had he realized the need of capable assistance, such as could be given by either Chick, Patsy or Ten-Ichi. But he had faced worse conditions, and he determined to carry on the single-handed fight to the bitter end.

After the studio had been engaged, he was tempted to call on Inspector McClusky for assistance.

The house might be shadowed, and a watch also kept on the seer's room and its approaches.

But he was dissuaded from this course by the fear that Francis Mayne might discover what was being done, and defer his murderous purpose until the conditions seemed to be favorable.

It was necessary, also, for Atherton's peace of mind that the scheme of the arch enemy should reach early culmination. The sooner the crash came, the better.

No; Nick Carter would continue to go it alone. And he was not dismayed at the prospect. On the contrary, he wore a smile of confidence.

The days passed without incident. Atherton's nervousness increased. The great detective himself was not in his best form.

While he believed that the crisis was near at hand, he was yet impatient with every hour's delay.

On the fourth night there was a furious gale. Signs creaked, shutters rattled, and there were other sounds, strange and disturbing to the shattered organism of the young broker. "It will come to-night," he said to Nick, as they entered the studio, shortly after dark. "I feel it in my bones."

"Well, that's what we are waiting for, Atherton. And there is another person who is waiting, with sleepless eyes, for the end to come."

"Madeline Mayne?"

"Yes. She is a changed being. She will do no more evil. She has been shocked into the right path. Remorse may bring about an early death."

Atherton resented this speech. "She has been the victim of a monstrous deception," he said, in some heat. "Poor girl. I pity her from the bottom of my heart."

Nick smiled indulgently. "So do I, and I wish her well. She has had a hard row to hoe. I hope the end of much of her misery and all of your suffering will come to-night."

Atherton shivered. "I hope so," he said; "and yet I dread the event."

"We can't fight empty air. Mayne is bound to appear sometime, and, when he does, he will find us ready for him."

"But he knows it, and will take action accordingly. He [illegible] no fool."

"No, he is no fool, and yet he is in such straits that he will take desperate chances. Besides, he can't see into my mind. He is a good guesser, I must admit, but if he makes any guess for to-night, he is apt to go wrong."

There was a small stand occupying a position against the wall, and midway between the couch and the bed. On this stand stood a bottle of apollinaris and some glasses.

There had been some complaint about the water supply of the city, and while the sanitary investigation, under the auspices of the board of health, was progressing, Nick, like many other citizens, determined to take no chances.

Before leaving for dinner that afternoon, he had gone to the nearest drug store and purchased the bottle of apollinaris.

As there was need of the utmost caution and vigilance, he was careful to note the appearance of the bottle and the position in which it was placed on the stand.

As soon as the studio was lighted, Nick stepped forward, and looked closely at the bottle. Atherton, who had followed him, said, anxiously: "It's all right, isn't it? It has never been opened, by the looks of it."

"Your eyes are not as sharp as mine," replied the detective, "or you would see that the bottle has been tampered with. Of course—for you did not place the bottle on the stand—you can't see that its position is not precisely the same. It has been moved half an inch forward. And the bottle has been opened, for the tinfoil covering the top and concealing the cork is not smooth in every place. There, on one side—do you see?— is a tiny wrinkle. It was not there two hours ago. We have not time for an analysis of the water. We will simply let the bottle alone."

"What does it mean?"

"It means that Francis Mayne expects to find us half dead or dead when he enters. We'll fool him a bunch. We'll pretend, and we'll retire early, and cease conversation."

Ever since the detective and the fear-haunted broker had occupied the studio, the skylight had been partly raised, apparently for the purpose of ventilation. As for the door, it was locked and bolted. Stout, oaken bars had been placed across the windows and securely nailed. Over these the shades had been drawn. There was, therefore, only one way in which the room could be entered by the enemy, and that was by the skylight.

Nine o'clock came, and there had been no disturbance of the quiet within the room. At ten o'clock, Nick threw himself on the couch, without undressing, and drew the counterpane over him. Atherton, in his corner, followed suit.

With eyes open, ears alert, in the half light shining through the electric bulbs, they waited, the one in fearsome expectancy, the other in fierce hope.

At midnight, a slight noise on the roof sent Arthur Atherton's heart into his throat, and caused Nick Carter to grip his revolver tightly. The crisis was near at hand!

Some moments passed without sound. Then the frame of the skylight creaked, and the end of a rope ladder appeared just below the opening into the room.

Swiftly and noiselessly, the counterpane which had covered Nick Carter's person was thrown aside. The great detective was ready for the contest.

His back was against the wall, and within a few inches of an electric button.

As soon as the legs of a man showed on the rope ladder, the button was pressed.

Then something happened.

From the ceiling sides, about the skylight opening, grappling hooks shot out and, viselike, clamped the neck of the descending intruder. There followed a yell of direst agony. The whole form of the enemy could now be seen. The attire was Oriental and fantastic, and, as the figure squirmed about the ladder, one hand clutching it, the other shut and swinging loosely, the effect was both startling and grotesque.

Suddenly, the closed hand raised, when—crack! crack! went the great detective's trusty revolver.

The crisis had, indeed, arrived. The report of Nick Carter's pistol was succeeded by an explosion that shook the building.

Then, amid the smoke, and while the furniture crashed, there shot into the apartment from the hole in the ceiling the body of Arthur Atherton's archenemy.

A small dynamite bomb had created the havoc, and both Nick Carter and the young broker must have been killed if the bomb had been thrown into the middle of the room, in accordance with the enemy's intention.

But the detective's quick pistol play had prevented any voluntary action on Francis Mayne's part.

One bullet had pierced the wrist of the hand which held the bomb, and the hand, flung back in a gesture of pain, had sent the instrument of death to the northwest corner of the studio, close by the door.

As it was, a portion of the studio was wrecked, and Nick and Atherton were terribly cut and bruised by flying fragments of furniture.

But the great detective, in the midst of his peril, never lost his presence of mind. He kept his eye on the form of the archfiend, whose destruction had been so carefully planned. When the smoke had cleared sufficiently, he saw that Mayne was lying motionless upon the floor.

As Nick, bleeding on head and face and with weak limbs, moved toward the prostrate form, Atherton cried out:

"Take care—he may be shamming!"

But Francis Mayne was not shamming. He was dead; and by his side was a small air gun, which had fallen from the pocket of his robe as his body shot downward from the skylight.

* * * * * * *

The newspapers next morning had a sensation, and Nick Carter was the hero of the hour. He had planned the grips which had caught the head of the descending villain, though he had not counted on the dynamite bomb.

But, as "all's well that ends well," he had no cause of complaint. The explanation of the assassin's action in coming down through the skylight, instead of hurling the bomb from the roof, was given to Inspector McClusky.

"If I had not thought that he would descend, in fact felt almost positive of it, I would never have gone to the trouble of fixing those grapplers and doing so much delicate electrical work. But I figured it out this way: Mayne will attempt to murder us in that room, and he will likely make preparations so that the descent from the skylight can be made with fair assurance of safety. Therefore, the poison in the apollinaris water. But he was also prepared for every emergency. There was the air gun, if we were not dead, as he had planned. And, finally, there was the dynamite bomb, which was to be made use of only as a last resort. There was the chance, which he must have calculated upon, that he might make a target of himself when he exposed his person on the rope ladder, but he probably hoped, in the event of failure of any of his plans, that he would be able to land the bomb before I could get in my work. If he had succeeded in this, he could probably have reached the roof on the instant of the explosion, and thus saved his bacon. But things didn't come his way. He is dead, and the State is saved the expense of a murder trial. Justice is satisfied, and so am I."

"I am sorry you didn't let me into the game, Nick," said the inspector.

"It was playing it low down on you, I'll admit, but consider my position. I was deep in the mire before I found that I really needed assistance, and then——"

"Obstinacy—combativeness, I should say—got in its deadly work on you. I understand, Nick, and I forgive you."

Arthur Atherton, no longer fear-haunted, has recovered both health and spirits. Never strong-minded, but the soul of honesty and amiability, he was quick to forgive the woman, who, from angel had turned to fiend, and then, repenting her sins, had struggled back to paths of peace and good will.

Nick Carter has his own views about mankind and morals, and, though he did not interpose any strong objection, for he is not a meddler in other men's affairs, he was not altogether pleased when, a few months after the tragic end of William Huntoon, alias Francis Mayne, Atherton led Madeline Mayne to the altar.

"She will always love him," the detective admitted. "She will be one of the most submissive and docile of wives; but, if she has a conscience, it is bound to trouble her a little, and I don't believe she can ever be truly happy."

THE END.

Next week's issue, No. 441, will contain "The Greenhouse Tragedy; or, The Stab Wound in the Dark."

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